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Exploring youth mentoring as a means of facilitating character growth and Positive Youth Development (PYD) in late childhood

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Abstract

This thesis explores character-focused youth mentoring as a means of supporting character growth and Positive Youth Development (PYD) in late childhood. It responds to gaps in the character education and youth mentoring literatures, namely that character education has often lacked developmental grounding while mentoring research has shown promise but has reported modest and uneven effects, leaving questions about how, for whom, and under what conditions mentoring supports development. The thesis argues for an expansive, non-instrumental, flourishing-oriented account of character, informed by Aristotelian character education and positive psychology, drawing on insights from social-emotional learning, and grounded in PYD and Relational Developmental Systems theory.

The research examines the WISE Mentoring programme, a school-based, character-focused mentoring programme delivered in Glasgow for children aged 9-11. The programme combines one-to-one mentoring, group activities, and a structured Wellbeing and Character curriculum focused on self-knowledge, growth mindset, goal setting, resilience, self-control, good judgement, and fairness. Conducted from a researcher-practitioner position, the thesis adopts a primarily qualitative, process-oriented design, complemented by a quantitative strand. Study 1 used an online diary method with 14 mentors to explore mentors' experiences of the programme and their perceptions of mentee development. Study 2 used focus groups with 19 children to examine children's experiences of mentoring, the curriculum, and perceived change. Study 3 used a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control-group design with 134 children to examine whether measured outcomes changed differently for programme participants and non-participants.

Across the qualitative studies, character-focused mentoring was experienced as supporting growth through the interaction of close relationships, structured curriculum content, personalisation, guided autonomy, and opportunities for application beyond sessions. Mentors and children described the importance of trust, openness, attentive listening, reciprocity, and group belonging. The curriculum activities appeared to provide shared language and concrete tools for reflecting on character, emotions, goals, decisions, and everyday challenges. Reported outcomes included increased confidence, self-awareness, self-regulation, openness, perspective-taking, reflection, intentionality, and the ability to apply strategies in real-life contexts. Mentors also described their own growth in confidence, empathy, adaptability, and

relational skills. The quantitative study found weak patterns in the expected direction across outcomes, but only self-esteem showed a statistically significant improvement for the programme group relative to the control group. This finding broadly aligned with the qualitative emphasis on self-esteem and sense of self, but the overall quantitative results were constrained by low power, heterogeneity, and limitations of standardised self-report measures.

The thesis contributes to theory by offering an integrated PYD model of character-focused youth mentoring, conceptualising it as a relational, structured, autonomy-supportive, and ecologically embedded developmental process. It suggests that character in mentoring may be “caught” through relational ethos and modelling, “taught” through personalised structured activities, and “sought” through interactions that increase youth autonomy and support application in everyday life, while emphasising that these pathways are interdependent. Practically, it highlights the need to balance closeness with boundaries, structure with flexibility, fidelity with personalisation, and youth agency with guided support. Methodologically, it argues that evaluations of character-focused mentoring require context-sensitive, multi-method, and developmentally appropriate approaches capable of capturing person-specific, reflective, and gradual forms of growth. Overall, the thesis puts forward an integrated, empirically grounded, PYD-informed account of how character-focused mentoring may support children’s flourishing, which future research can test, refine, and extend.

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Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Introduction

In recent decades, there has been growing recognition of the importance of supporting young people's wellbeing, identity, ethical responsibility, and broader social and emotional development. This shift is reflected in increasing policy and research attention to children's rights, wellbeing, and holistic development, including commitments such as the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scottish law in 2024. Within this context, fields such as character education, youth mentoring, and Positive Youth Development (PYD) have gained prominence. While these fields have developed through different traditions, conceptualisations, and practices, they share a common commitment to young people's holistic development, supporting them to flourish as individuals and contribute meaningfully to society (Elias et al., 2014; Lerner et al., 2015; Rhodes, 1994).

Despite the rich histories of these fields, particularly character education and youth mentoring, and rising research interest in them, important conceptual, empirical, and practical gaps remain. Character education, concerned with the development of children's character strengths and virtues, faces challenges concerning the lack of a shared operational definition, inconsistency in empirical methodology, and the extent to which programmes are grounded in child development theory. This limits both rigorous evaluation and the design of developmentally appropriate interventions (Arthur, 2019; Kristjánsson, Harrison, & Peterson, 2025). At the same time, youth mentoring has shown promise in facilitating positive youth outcomes, yet large-scale studies consistently report modest and inconsistent effects (Rhodes, 2020), raising questions about how and under what conditions mentoring supports development. Across both fields, there remains limited understanding of the mechanisms most critical for fostering social, emotional, and character growth in developmentally grounded ways.

This thesis suggests that the areas of character education and youth mentoring may benefit each other and that both may benefit from embracing the PYD framework, which is a strength-based, ecological, developmentally grounded approach that engages young people within their communities to promote their development. It adopts a holistic, expansive, non-instrumental view of character, as a set of positive strengths and qualities constitutive of flourishing, and draws on Relational Developmental Systems theory (Overton, 2015), which underpins PYD. Using a case study of a youth mentoring programme with a character-focused curriculum, it explores character-focused mentoring as a means of facilitating character growth and PYD in

late childhood, a developmental period marked by rapid changes in self-understanding, self-regulation, and social awareness (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2013).

The research is conducted in a researcher-practitioner capacity, reflecting my role in developing and delivering the programme, as well as evaluating its impact. Methodologically, it takes a primarily qualitative, process-oriented approach, centring the experiences of children and mentors to explore how mentoring is experienced and how developmental change may occur. This is complemented by a quasi-experimental component examining changes in outcomes associated with programme participation. By integrating theoretical perspectives with lived experience, the thesis contributes to understanding the mechanisms through which mentoring may support character development and PYD, while also seeking to bridge the gap between research and practice (Mahoney, 2016) and inform the design of programmes that support young people's holistic development.

The thesis is structured as follows. In order to set the stage for an approach to character education positioned within the PYD theoretical framework, Chapter 1 reviews the literature on character education and develops a conceptualisation of character that defines the scope of the current research. Chapter 2 presents the PYD framework, which provides a developmental-science grounding for the approach to character education adopted in this thesis. Chapter 3 reviews the youth mentoring literature, which has shown promise in facilitating PYD and character development. Chapter 4 presents the current research, including the programme studied, research questions, and reflexive positioning. Chapter 5 presents and discusses the findings from a diary study exploring how adult mentors in a character-focused youth mentoring programme perceive their experiences and the development of their mentees. Chapter 6 presents and discusses the findings from a focus group study exploring how children in the same programme perceive their experiences and their own development. Chapter 7 presents and discusses the findings from a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group study investigating whether mean changes in measured outcomes from pre-test to post-test differed between children participating in the programme and children not participating in it. Chapter 8 integrates these findings, reflects on the contributions of this work to the fields of character education, youth mentoring, and Positive Youth Development (PYD), and offers recommendations for research and practice.

Chapter 1 Character education and the scope of this research

The formation of character has a long history in discussions of youth development. The term character originally comes from a Greek word for mark or engraving, alluding to something deeply rooted or engraved in one's inner life, attitudes, and values (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2007). Aristotle referred to it as "the life of right conduct" (McCullough & Snyder, 2000). Most often the word character has been equated to mean *good* character, and its formation has commonly been discussed within the context of education. Generally, character education is concerned with education towards positive qualities that can be intentionally fostered and developed, such as honesty, compassion, perseverance, self-control, and responsibility (Arthur et al., 2015; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

There is broad agreement that character is "plural", meaning that it comprises a variety of factors. These have been referred to in different ways in the literature, for example as virtues, positive habits, traits, character strengths, qualities, skills, and competencies (Fadel, 2015; Kristjánsson, 2015; Park et al., 2017; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Investigating these perspectives reveals an expansive and diverse literature, reflecting different theoretical approaches and traditions. Some focus exclusively on moral character and the cultivation of ethical virtues such as honesty and integrity. Others emphasise the development of civic responsibility, discipline, and the values needed for a democratic society (Vessels & Huitt, 2005). Still others focus on performance-related interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intellectual skills and competencies needed to achieve academic, work, and life success such as perseverance and resilience (Park et al., 2017; Tough, 2012). In contrast, an Aristotelian conception sees character as defined by virtues characterised as excellences related to one's flourishing (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015). Similarly, a positive psychology conception sees good character as an extensive catalogue of strengths and virtues that form a life of wellbeing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

This first chapter will review this expansive literature in order to capture the variety of tensions and issues in the field of character development and to define my own conceptualisation of character which will be used in this research. It will begin with an overview of an Aristotelian notion of character education. Then other perspectives on character education, including moral behaviour and achievement narratives, related terms such as social-emotional learning, and

perspectives rooted in positive psychology, will be reviewed. The chapter will conclude with an argument for the need to go beyond deficit perspectives, embrace flourishing and wellbeing as the aims of character education, and acknowledge context and ecological systems. This will serve as a foundation for a conception of character grounded in the developmental framework of Positive Youth Development (PYD) (introduced in Chapter 2).

1.1 Overview of Aristotelian character education

1.1.1 Background in moral philosophy

The study of character has deep roots in moral philosophy, as the pursuit of the “good life”. The most important foundation for this was laid by Aristotle’s virtue ethics (Arthur, 2019; Kristjánsson, 2015). According to Aristotle, the *telos*, translated as the end goal or purpose of human life, is *eudaimonia*, translated as flourishing, wellbeing or living a full, complete, and happy life (Carr, 2012). Aristotle considered *eudaimonia* to be a form of living characterised in terms of the practice of *arete*, or virtues. Importantly, he saw these virtues as both conducive to and constitutive of *eudaimonia*, meaning that while they are an instrumental precondition of happiness, leading to it, they are also a characteristic of happiness, constituting what it means, and thus an end goal in themselves (Kristjánsson, 2015). This non-instrumental framing of character as constitutive of flourishing is central to the current research.

Unlike Plato, who saw virtues as the suppression of passions through reason, Aristotle viewed virtue as a balance-point between extremes (e.g., between fear and recklessness or hedonism and self-mortification), guided by practical wisdom. He referred to this practical wisdom, defined as a kind of common sense that helps to determine true virtue and guides an individual towards *eudaimonia*, as *phronesis*. Instead of being concerned strictly with observable prosocial “morally right” actions, this conception of character includes one’s motivations for actions, the manner in which they are performed, thoughts, judgements, intentions, emotions, and the state of character they relate to (Kristjánsson, 2010). Such a conception is tied to a naturalist ontological basis and understands virtuous character as intrinsically constitutive of this *eudaimonia* (Kristjánsson, 2016). This emphasis on inner states of being, while also recognising that these are expressed and shaped in relational contexts, is key to the current research and to the methodological approach adopted later in the thesis.

Over time, other moral theories, such as Kant's deontological ethics, shifted the focus of much early modern moral philosophy from character and eudaimonia to moral duty and laws. A Kantian deontology focuses on the ethics of obligation ("What should I do?") while an Aristotelian understanding of character is concerned with helping individuals cultivate qualities of character and habits that will allow them to flourish ("What sort of person should I become?") (Lapsley & Yeager, 2012; Watson, 1990). However, 20th century philosophy saw a major revival of virtue ethics. In the United Kingdom, this return to virtue is often traced to Anscombe's (1958) "Modern moral philosophy", which called for a return to virtue ethics and Aristotle's naturalistic view of morality, bringing character and virtue back to the centre of contemporary moral philosophy. Building on this revival, Foot (1978) and MacIntyre (1981) further developed virtue ethics, emphasising virtues as grounded in human flourishing and practical reasoning and situating virtue ethics within social practices and communities. This was especially influential in education, as it aligned with the growing role of schools in fostering personal, moral, and social development. Together, these and other thinkers helped establish virtue ethics as a key theoretical foundation for character education, shaping contemporary approaches to moral development in schools and educational policy. The next section briefly situates this Aristotelian revival within policy and practice trends.

1.1.2 Historical and current trends in character education

"The formation of character could be said to be the aim that all general education has historically set out to achieve." (Arthur, 2019)

The formation of character has a rich history within schooling and was a fundamental aim of formal education for centuries. Arthur (2003, 2019) provides an excellent overview of this history within the United Kingdom. This includes support for character education by educational progressives as far back as the Scottish Enlightenment, followed by Robert Owen's Institute for the Formation of Character established in New Lanark in 1816, as well as the long-standing intertwining of moral and religious aims in schooling following the "recapture" of schools by the Churches.

Over time, the formal teaching of character declined, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as educational systems became more focused on academic attainment, scientific progress, and vocational skills. Coupled with wider intellectual trends which positioned values

as subjective and work by Hartshorne and May (1928) which challenged the stability of character traits and highlighted the role of context, the view that schools should engage in moral character formation gradually crumbled (Kristjánsson, 2002).

Broader educational reforms following World War II were shaped by concerns about the “moral collapse” of civilised societies, especially in light of the Holocaust. Thinkers such as Kohlberg and education policymakers across Europe placed renewed emphasis on moral and civic education as safeguards against future atrocities, with schools increasingly seen as central to shaping ethical citizens in democratic societies (Shapira, 2013). This emphasis laid important groundwork for future approaches to character education.

While character education did not disappear entirely in the decades that followed, it only recently regained prominence in policy and practice. The 1988 Education Reform Act emphasised pupils’ holistic development and preparation for adult life, aligning closely with later character education aims encompassing such holistic development (Harrison et al., 2016). Renewed interest grew in the late 1990s and early 2000s, particularly through Citizenship Education following the Crick Report (1998), which responded to concerns about declining civic participation and social cohesion. Although not always framed explicitly as character education, these initiatives emphasised responsibility, ethical awareness, virtue, and community engagement (Arthur, 2003, Arthur et al., 2008; Crick, 1999). Subsequent policy developments, including initiatives such as *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning* (DfES, 2005), further reinforced a whole-child approach and helped pave the way for cross-political support for character education (Harrison et al., 2016).

Character education has gained traction in recent years, particularly with the 2012 establishment of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (JCCV), which has driven interdisciplinary work in the field. Following the *Character and Resilience Manifesto* (Paterson et al., 2014), both Labour and Conservative MPs have advocated for integrating character development into education (Arthur et al., 2015). In 2014, then Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan introduced a government programme of funding and recognition for character education, including competitive grants and “Character Awards” for schools and organisations (DfE, 2014; Harrison et al., 2016), and later reinforced the need for intentional character development in schools (Morgan, 2017). A 2017 Department for Education report surveying 880 schools in England found that 97% of schools aimed to develop character, often in order to promote good

citizenship (Marshall et al., 2017). Notably, there was also significant overlap between character education and the development of non-cognitive skills, social and emotional skills, and strength-based approaches such as growth mindset, values education, and religious education. This overlap will form a key thread throughout this thesis, since the programme studied draws on SEL-informed evidence concerning social-emotional competencies and implementation, while situating these within a broader flourishing-oriented and developmental account of character.

A similar trend towards increased character education emerged in Scotland, where the 2004 *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) emphasised four capacities: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors (Education Scotland, 2025). This aimed to give young people the “opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to adapt, think critically and flourish in today’s world” (Education Scotland, 2025). The CfE is closely aligned with character education principles, with a Demos report concluding that “character education sits at the heart of the *Curriculum for Excellence*” (Birdwell, Scott, & Reynolds, 2015, p. 44). Although the CfE uses the language of citizenship rather than character (Biesta, 2008; Swanson & Pashby, 2016), there is overlap between these, since civic virtues are considered to be a core aspect of character education (JCCV, 2017).

1.1.3 Aristotelian character education according to the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

How different scholars, authors, and educators have defined character education even within the last 30 years has been extremely diverse. Some have defined character as knowledge of virtue, others as good traits and habits that shape moral actions, and others as a capacity for empathy, discipline, and prosocial skills (Davis, 2003; Lapsley & Yeager, 2012; Wynne & Ryan, 1997). One prominent conceptualisation, influenced by Aristotle’s virtue ethics, has been developed by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (JCCV).

This approach defines character as a set of personal dispositions that inform motivation and guide conduct, including virtues, traits, and habits that form a “complex constellation of psychological dimensions of a person” (Berkowitz, 2002, p. 49). According to the JCCV’s *Framework for Character Education in Schools* (JCCV, 2024), virtues are positive traits that enable people to live well (Arthur et al., 2015). The Framework gives no definitive list of

virtues, as this is seen to depend on people's individual circumstances. Virtues do not constitute a single trait that a person either does or does not have. Instead, they are treated as multidimensional dispositions involving perception, understanding, reasoning, emotion, identity, motivation, and practice.

According to the framework, virtues can be developed through three primary pathways. They can be *taught* through explicit instruction in virtue knowledge and reasoning (Morgan, 2017); *caught* through an ethos that fosters character and role modelling (Birdwell et al., 2015); and *sought* through opportunities to form habits and actively pursue character growth (JCCV, 2024). Habituation plays a central role in virtue development, aligning with Aristotle's view that virtues are cultivated through repeated action – just as one becomes a builder by building or a musician by playing an instrument, one becomes virtuous by practising virtuous actions (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2007). This positions character growth as the gradual development of stable dispositions through applied practice. These three pathways will be returned to later in the thesis for understanding how a structured character curriculum, mentoring relationship, and opportunities to practise and apply strengths in context may work together as mechanisms of growth.

1.1.3.1 JCCV's Classification of Character

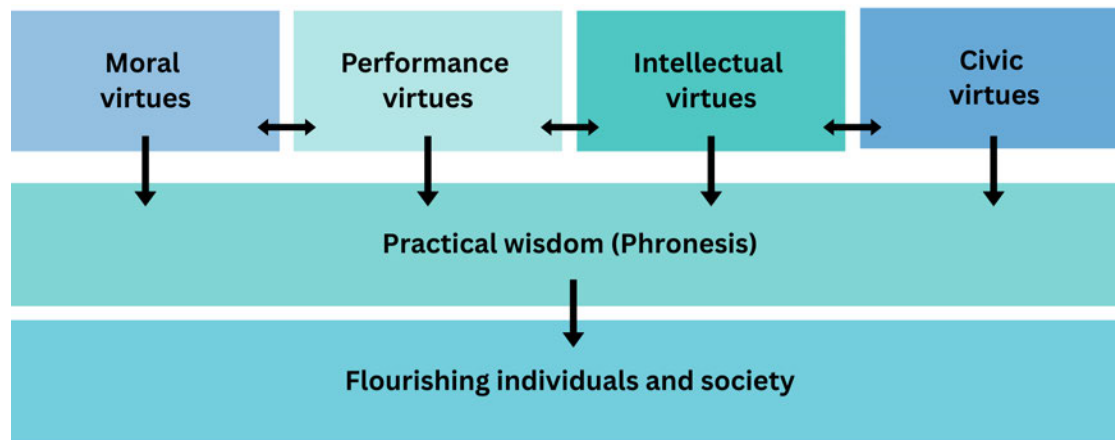
According to the JCCV's (2017, 2024) *Framework for Character Education in Schools*, there are four aspects of character, corresponding to four types of virtues (see Figure 1).

- (1) Moral virtues, described as character traits that guide ethical actions such as honesty, justice, compassion, and integrity;
- (2) Performance virtues, which are self-management traits that enable the above virtues, such as confidence, perseverance, and resilience;
- (3) Intellectual virtues, which are character traits related to discernment and the pursuit of knowledge, such as curiosity, critical thinking, and reflection; and
- (4) Civic virtues, described as necessary for responsible citizenship and contribution to the common good, such as community awareness and social justice.

These virtues are unified by the overarching meta-virtue (5) Phronesis (practical wisdom), which helps individuals discern and apply virtues in daily life.

Figure 1

The Building Blocks of Character according to the JCCV



Note. Adapted from “The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools,” by The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (JCCV), 2024, <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/The-Jubilee-Centre-Framework-for-Character-Education-in-Schools.pdf>, although the virtues appear in a different order in the JCCV framework.

The classification was also adapted for the Scottish context, with the four domains of character explicitly mapped onto the Curriculum for Excellence’s four capacities: responsible citizenship (moral), confident individuals (performance), successful learners (intellectual), and effective contributors (civic) (Association for Character Education, 2019). This is relevant to the current research, which is situated in the Scottish educational context.

This classification builds on a large body of research. The distinction between moral and performance character is well-established, resembling distinctions made by some moral philosophers between goodness of character (moral focus) and strength of character (performance focus) (Kupperman, 1991). A related distinction is made in the social cognition literature between core goodness virtues and commitment virtues (Piazza et al., 2014). Core goodness virtues, such as honesty and kindness, are valued intrinsically and seen as unconditionally good. In contrast, commitment virtues, such as diligence and determination, are considered morally neutral in themselves but enhance the morality or immorality of an individual’s actions (Landy, Piazza, & Goodwin, 2016). In other words, performance virtues may enable moral action but do not, on their own, guarantee moral character.

This two-way distinction between moral and performance character also appears in other influential frameworks. Lickona and Davidson (2005), for example, distinguish between moral character as the qualities needed for relationships and integrity and performance character as the qualities needed for pursuing goals and accomplishment. A similar contrast is captured in Brooks' (2015) distinction between "eulogy virtues" and "résumé virtues," which highlights the tension between moral depth and externally rewarded achievement. More recently, Character Lab has made a related distinction between "strengths of heart" and "strengths of will" (see section 1.2.3.1 below).

The third category, intellectual virtues, also has backing from within virtue epistemology and educational research (Baehr, 2013; Roberts & Wood, 2007). It corresponds with Character Lab's "strengths of mind" (see below) and describes qualities such as curiosity and open-mindedness, which enable deep understanding and intellectual rigour (Timpe & Boyd, 2016). Some view these qualities as constitutive of a broader view of intelligence, involving not only giftedness but also intellectual honesty, humility, deliberation, attentiveness, and conscientiousness (Baehr, 2021). Intellectual virtues have also been described as closely connected to moral virtues, particularly where judgement and discernment are concerned. This overlap is evident in the role of *phronesis*, which sits at the intersection of moral and intellectual functioning and guides how virtues are understood and applied in context (Baehr, 2011; Wilson, 2017).

The fourth category, civic virtues, relates to community involvement, responsibility, and democratic citizenship and is tied to character education's resurgence in Britain (Arthur, Davies, & Hahn, 2008; DfE, 2016). Civic education approaches, such as Dewey's "just community" model, emphasise participation and shared responsibility (Power & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2008), with evidence supporting participatory practices such as active engagement, reflection, and open discussion as key for fostering civic competence and civic character (Torney-Purta & Lopez, 2006).

1.1.4 Problems with the study and implementation of Aristotelian character education

There is a large body of literature concerned with critiquing character education. Some critiques appear overstated and stem from misunderstandings of its Aristotelian foundation. For example, character education is sometimes framed as prescriptive, paternalistic, and outdated, with some arguing that character education should be dropped (Kristjánsson, 2013). However, modern neo-Aristotelian approaches reject rigid doctrines of obligation in favour of a richer account of the flourishing of the whole person and empirical studies suggest that young people are increasingly more interested in character education (Arthur, 2015). Additionally, claims that character education should be dropped overlook that all teachers and youth workers engage in character education, whether they realise it or not (Carr, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2013). Character is shaped through all human interaction and character virtues are embedded in the hidden curriculum (Portelli, 1993) – in everyday norms, teacher expectations, standards for honesty and integrity, and the relational climate of the school community (Carr, 2012). The real question, then, is not whether character formation occurs, but how it is understood and enacted in practice (Pike, 2010; Wiley, 1998).

Still, while some objections may be overstated, there are well-founded criticisms which raise legitimate questions for further research (Kristjánsson et al., 2025). One such criticism is the lack of definitional clarity. As noted by Arthur (2003), to begin a discussion about character education is to “enter a minefield of conflicting definition and ideology” (p. 1). While this reflects the rapid expansion of character education as a field spanning multiple conceptual and disciplinary traditions (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025), it also creates challenges for comparison across programmes and for meta-analytic synthesis (Arthur, 2003, 2019). This is exacerbated by implementation challenges as programmes often face frequent turnover in teachers and programme staff (Elias et al., 2003) and may lack the training, resources, and conceptual clarity needed for effective implementation (e.g., overemphasising moral reasoning or treating habituation as rote repetition) (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2007; Vessels & Huitt, 2005). Relatedly, the field lacks a clear and consistent empirical methodology. Existing research has used diverse approaches (e.g., self-reports, observations, and scenario-based measures), but these often capture only isolated aspects of character and correlations between measures are often weak, reinforcing the view that character is multidimensional and may require varied assessment tools (Boe et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2017). Although the empirical

base has grown considerably, recent meta-analytic evidence suggests that character education programmes have only a small positive overall effect and that the field continues to be limited by methodological diversity, implementation inconsistency, uneven outcome measures, and effects diminishing over time (Brown et al., 2023).

A further criticism is that character education has not always been sufficiently grounded in child development theory and in children's changing capacities and needs, making it vulnerable to becoming a set of moral aspirations detached from how development actually unfolds (Williams, 2000). Sokol, Hammond, and Berkowitz (2010) note that the relationship between character education and developmental psychology has "long been marked by tension" (p. 581) and argue for the need to "psychologise" character by drawing more systematically on developmental accounts of self-regulation, perspective-taking, autonomy, empathy, and moral reasoning. Even recent neo-Aristotelian work has acknowledged the need for greater engagement with developmental psychology, particularly in explaining the emergence and operation of *phronesis* across developmental stages (Kristjánsson et al., 2025). This suggests that one difficulty for character education is not simply whether virtues can be taught, but whether programmes are adequately tailored to the developmental capacities of the children and young people to whom they are addressed. For this thesis, these critiques motivate the need for a clear conceptualisation of character (this chapter) and a developmentally grounded framework (Chapter 2).

Furthermore, in a meta-analysis of character education programmes, Berkowitz and Bier (2007) conclude that these do foster the development of character qualities, but they note that many effective programmes do not explicitly use the term "character" or focus primarily on virtue-based morality. Along similar lines, previous research suggests that expansive approaches – addressing a broader range of social, emotional, behavioural, and psychosocial competencies – often show stronger or more consistent effects than approaches focused narrowly on moral reasoning or virtue language alone. There is also a growing number of calls in education for character education to engage with more empirically rooted fields such as social-emotional learning (SEL), which do just that. This is based on the argument that moral virtues may depend on foundational skills like self-awareness and social competence (Elias et al., 2014; Zakrzewski, 2021). Without these, the desire to "do the right thing" may not translate into action. This goes beyond just a moral versus performance distinction by drawing on empirically tested approaches to skill development (Elias et al., 2014).

More recent work also supports this integrative direction. A thematic review by Oldham and McLoughlin (2025) found that character education research is increasingly intersectional, making the case for greater dialogue across the fields of character education, moral education, civic education, and SEL. Furthermore, empirical approaches that have combined SEL and character development support the notion that SEL skills help enable the enactment of character virtues, and that integrating them supports mental wellbeing (Hatchimonji et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2025). In this thesis, this convergence is taken forward both by grounding character within the developmental PYD framework and by drawing selectively on SEL's evidence base concerning social-emotional competencies and their implementation.

1.2 Critical review of other perspectives on character and related terms

In order to set the stage for the conceptualisation of character espoused by this research, this next section will review other perspectives on character education including moral behaviour, social mobility, and achievement narratives as well as related terms such as non-cognitive skills and SEL. This is included not to exhaust these literatures, but to clarify where the present conceptualisation aligns and departs, and why it rejects deficit and instrumental framings while drawing on empirically grounded insights into social-emotional development, relational practice, skill-building, and implementation where relevant.

This clarification is important, because the global renaissance of interest in the subject of character development comes hand in hand with widely varying conceptualisations. Alongside an increase in research, publications, and scholarly interest, more schools have put character on the curriculum and new institutes dedicated to character development have been established worldwide (e.g., Association for Character Education, Character Counts!, Character.org, Character Lab, etc.) (Allen & Bull, 2018). However, again, conceptions of character across these initiatives vary, with some emphasising moral and civic virtues (Bones, 2010; Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2026) and others focusing more strongly on performance-related qualities, psychological skills, or attributes associated with achievement and later life outcomes (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Heckman et al., 2019; Tough, 2012), shaping which outcomes are prioritised and how success is evaluated.

Some perspectives on character education contrast sharply with the virtue ethics framework of the JCCV discussed above and with my own conceptualisation of character. These include

moral deficit perspectives, which view character education as a means to correct students' morality, and poverty and social mobility perspectives, which frame character as a tool for overcoming poverty. I loosely base this distinction on Handsman's (2021) overview of changing discourse about character education in the United States between 1985 and 2016. Analysing 600 U.S. articles, she identified three narratives: a virtue narrative (aligned with Aristotle), a behaviour narrative (I will refer to this as the moral deficit perspective), and an achievement narrative (including poverty/social mobility and attainment strands).

1.2.1 Against a moral deficit perspective on character education

The moral deficit perspective on character education contextualises the need for character education in concerns about youth crime, violence, drug abuse, and other destructive behaviours (Lawton, 1997). In its stronger forms, it concludes that youth engage in unethical behaviour because they do not know the difference between right and wrong and argues that character education and teaching moral virtues can solve these issues (Handsman, 2021; Labaree, 2008). This "litany of alarm" (Arthur, 2003) was particularly prevalent in 20th-century U.S. discourse (Handsman, 2021; Kristjánsson, 2013) and continues to surface even in the United Kingdom today, including references to "Broken Britain" narratives following events such as the 2011 Tottenham riots (Allen & Bull, 2018; Reeves, 2014; Tyler, 2013).

This perspective is problematic as it blames societal issues on individual failings. It seeks improvements through "kid-fixing" instead of reform that might address broader social, economic, and power structures, structural inequality, trauma, and formal labelling that affect the rise of issues such as drug abuse, crime, and adolescent suicide (Kristjánsson, 2013; McAra & McVie, 2025). However, it is important to note that not all moral character programmes adopt this deficit view. Character Counts!, for instance, promotes trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship without referencing moral decline (Bones, 2010; Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2026). Criticism sometimes conflates moral character education with moral panic, unfairly dismissing programmes nurturing young people's ethical development (Kristjánsson, 2013). Fostering morality in young people need not conflict with social reform and developing ethical individuals contributes to a flourishing society (Harrison, 2015). However, using character education as a solution to perceived moral decay remains highly problematic.

1.2.2 Against a poverty and social mobility perspective on character education

A separate perspective on character education discusses this as a means of addressing poverty and social mobility. It points to gaps between socio-economic classes in both academic achievement and in qualities such as perseverance (e.g., Reeves, 2014). Some go as far as to link poor academic performance to a “failure of character” and a “lack of strong personal habits” (Ryan, 2003). This narrative has affected programmes like the *Knowledge is Power Program* (KIPP) in the United States, which targets character development as a means of improving college success for low-income students (The KIPP Foundation, 2016; Tuttle et al., 2013). Similarly, Tough (2012) argues that character interventions can help disadvantaged children succeed academically, a view increasingly influential in educational policy (Kristjánsson, 2015). Such a narrative was also present in the *Character and Resilience Manifesto* published by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility (Paterson et al., 2014) which presented character strengths such as resilience, delayed gratification, and social-emotional skills as “the missing link in the chain” (APPG, 2012) and key to breaking cycles of poverty.

This perspective is also problematic. Instead of discussing structural inequalities that prevent low-income young people from accessing opportunities, it implies that poverty is the result of personal inadequacy and a deficit of character, despite more recent social mobility work emphasising that improving life chances depends on wider structural and place-based inequalities and requires more than education alone (Social Mobility Commission, 2025). Such a narrative shifts the focus away from systemic reform and towards “fixing the most difficult populations of students” (Handsman, 2021, p. 16). Similar critiques have been raised by Cushing (2024, 2025), who argues that educational interventions and school policies framed around oracy, discipline, and social mobility can often frame low-income students’ language, behaviour, and self-presentation as individual shortcomings. By viewing these students as lacking the traits needed for success and “correcting” their shortcomings, they place the burden for overcoming inequality on students instead of addressing structural inequalities.

Some have called this approach “not only short sighted but morally repugnant” (Becker & Marecek, 2008, p. 1771), uncomfortably close to a vision of the middle class as superior to the working class and entailing dangerous cultural judgments and moral imperatives which impede

reflexivity in policy, research, and pedagogy (Kirchgasler, 2018). The concern here is not with supporting young people in disadvantaged contexts to develop strengths, confidence, resilience, or social-emotional capacities, but with framings that make these qualities appear to be the principal explanation for, or solution to, structural inequality. Due to the prevalence of such narratives in the wider discourse around character development, I consider it important to state that this research and the programme it studies distance themselves from narratives that might imply that inequality stems from personal failings and that solutions to social inequality lie in reshaping individuals' characters, behaviours, and mindsets without addressing the broader structural barriers they face (Allen & Bull, 2018; Handsman, 2021; Ris, 2015). In fact, the critiques of both moral deficit and poverty narratives motivate this thesis's framing of a strength-based, context-sensitive approach to development rather than one rooted in moral panic or individual failing.

1.2.3 The achievement perspective on character, non-cognitive skills, and social-emotional skills

There is another increasingly popular perspective on character education oriented towards achievement. This views character education primarily as a means to improving academic and employment success (Jacobsen, 2007). Indeed, research shows clear associations between particular character-related qualities, social-emotional competencies, and academic performance (Arthur et al., 2012; Heckman et al., 2019), leading many to justify character education on these grounds. This narrative has grown significantly, present in only 4% of the literature between 1985 and 2003 but in as much as 87% of the literature between 2003 and 2016 (Handsman, 2021). Some even argue that character education's future hinges on proving its impact on academic outcomes (Sutton, 2009). However, while I draw selectively on many of the skill-based strategies described in this section (see also section 4.3.2), on their underlying constructs (e.g., self-regulation, growth mindset, resilience) and evidence base, such an instrumental framing of character is also at odds with the non-instrumental, flourishing-oriented stance I adopt in this thesis.

The achievement perspective focuses on performance character and has significant overlap with terms such as non-cognitive skills, soft skills, 21st century skills, academic tenacity, and social-emotional skills (Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Kautz et al., 2014), which are associated with the attitudes, behaviours, personality traits, and habits that underpin educational and employment

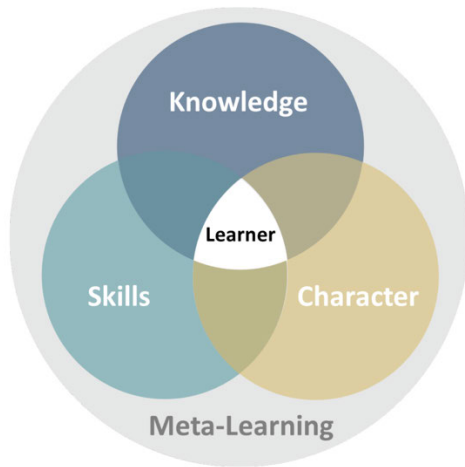
success. Some research has highlighted traits such as self-regulation, grit, growth mindset, and delayed gratification as important predictors of academic success, sometimes over and above cognitive ability (Duckworth et al., 2019; Dweck et al., 2014). More recent work similarly suggests that non-cognitive and social-emotional skills such as persistence, curiosity, empathy, and emotional control predict achievement beyond cognitive skills (Malanchini et al., 2024; OECD, 2024), although more research is needed to determine the pathways through which these qualities affect achievement (Stankov & Lee, 2025).

The following section will briefly outline specific achievement approaches, before discussing their limitations. Frameworks of *non-cognitive skills* range from including stable personality traits to focusing on malleable social-emotional competencies such as motivation, perseverance, resilience, self-control, empathy, and growth mindset (Farrington et al., 2012; García, 2016; Gutman & Schoon, 2013). The term is used inconsistently, sometimes equated with character and sometimes treated as an umbrella category of which character is only a subset (Kautz et al., 2014; Schuelka et al., 2019). *Soft skills*, often used interchangeably with life skills, non-cognitive skills, and character (García, 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Lippman et al., 2015), cover non-technical employability skills such as social skills, communication, critical thinking, self-control, and a positive self-concept (Blades et al., 2012; Cunningham & Villaseñor, 2014).

21st century skills frameworks, focused on describing the competencies needed for success in a global, technology-driven world (Lisbon Council, 2007; Trilling & Fadel, 2009), also overlap with the above. Across these frameworks, character and related qualities are often folded into a broad “future skills” agenda. More recent models explicitly incorporate ethics and citizenship alongside employability-oriented competencies (Griffin et al., 2012; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). Two frameworks, by the World Economic Forum (2015) and the Center for Curriculum Redesign (CCR, 2024), explicitly integrate character. The CCR, in particular, takes the most holistic approach (see Figure 2). It defines education across four dimensions: knowledge, skills, character (including curiosity, courage, resilience, and ethics), and meta-learning (including metacognition and meta-emotions). The final dimension of meta-learning is seen as the superordinate competency and has some resonance with *phronesis* as a meta-virtue.

Figure 2

Four-Dimensional (4D) Competencies Framework according to the CCR



Note. Reprinted from “4D Framework Version 1.2 Update,” by the Center for Curriculum Redesign. Copyright 2024, CCR

Another term that overlaps with character, non-cognitive skills, life skills, and 21st century skills is the term *social-emotional skills*, often discussed through the lens of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Originally developed from work on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), the most widely recognised SEL framework, developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), outlines five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (see Figure 3), all of which can be developed across school, family, and community contexts (Mahoney & Weissberg, 2019; Meyers et al., 2015).

SEL has also been criticised for the breadth and flexibility of its definitions, which can make it function as an umbrella term for a wide range of qualities and practices beyond academic learning or cognitive ability (Dussault & Thompson, 2024), or for “anything that involved motivation, emotion, or good character” (Mayer & Cobb, 2000, p. 170). CASEL (2013), for example, defines SEL loosely as a guiding principle for coordinating all “academic, youth development, and prevention activities” in a school. As a result, SEL interventions vary widely in focus, from decision-making to self-control, conflict resolution, or civic values (Opengart, 2007). Some also question whether the term “social-emotional skills” fully captures the range of constructs included (Petway et al., 2016; Wigelsworth et al., 2017). From the perspective of

this thesis, this breadth is not treated as a weakness. On the contrary, the critique of SEL developed below is targeted at versions of SEL and related skills frameworks that become narrow, instrumental, and decontextualised. Approaches that do not reduce SEL to discrete skills instruction, but include attention to ethos, relationships, staff engagement, family and community links, and the wider conditions through which social and emotional development is supported, are much closer to this thesis’s conceptualisation of holistic character development.

Figure 3

Five SEL competencies according to the CASEL Wheel



Note. Reprinted from “Social Emotional Learning (SEL) – Resources for Parents,” by PEI Literacy Alliance, 2026. Copyright 2020, CASEL

These and other frameworks reflect the growing trend to align character education with non-cognitive, soft, 21st century, and social-emotional skills and with attainment and success. It could be argued that KIPP and Paul Tough’s work, mentioned above, also sit within this narrative. It is also present in ClassDojo, a widely-used app based on the growth mindset and on James Heckman’s work on the economics of character education (Williamson, 2017). Within character education, this narrative is perhaps best represented by Character Lab, founded by Angela Duckworth, which helped popularise research on character and an achievement-oriented conceptualisation in the United States.

1.2.3.1 Character Lab's Classification of Character

The Character Lab (2026) defines character as our intentions and actions that benefit both others and ourselves, equating it with terms like social-emotional skills, life skills, and 21st century skills. It categorises character strengths into three dimensions:

- (1) Strengths of heart, which are interpersonal strengths that help us relate to others (e.g., gratitude, kindness, honesty);
- (2) Strengths of will, which are intrapersonal strengths that support goal achievement (e.g., grit, growth mindset, self-control); and
- (3) Strengths of mind, which are intellectual strengths that foster reasoning and creativity (e.g., curiosity, judgement, creativity).

Figure 4

Character dimensions according to The Character Lab.



Note. Adapted from “Heart Mind Will: What character is and why it matters,” by A. Duckworth, 2024. Copyright 2026, Character Lab

This classification aligns with the achievement narrative, focusing on how character supports academic success. Apart from the omission of phronesis, it closely matches the JCCV's framework, with some Character Lab materials explicitly subsuming civic virtue within “strengths of heart” (Duckworth, 2024). The model is backed by research supporting a three-factor structure of character (interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intellectual) linked to school achievement (Park et al., 2017) and mirrors earlier models of virtue and personality (Shryack et al., 2010; Tellegen & Waller, 2008) (see also section 1.1.3.1 above).

Notably, whilst much of the research aligned with an achievement narrative focuses on performance character (i.e., “will”), Character Lab includes moral/civic (“heart”) and intellectual (“mind”) character as well. However, in achievement-oriented uses of this framework, even qualities like kindness are largely discussed in terms of their contribution to classroom cooperation, motivation, or long-term academic success (Caprara et al., 2000; Dweck et al., 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011). This shows how moral qualities can sometimes be drawn into an instrumental, performance-oriented lens within this framework.

1.2.3.2 Limitations of an achievement, economic, and 21st century perspective on character

The achievement narrative in character education, seen in the work of Duckworth, Dweck, Heckman, Tough, and the Character Lab, often overlaps with the poverty and social mobility narrative. Although Duckworth doesn’t necessarily frame it this way, grit, along with resilience, has been discussed hand-in-hand with narratives of social mobility, as a theory concerned with helping disadvantaged children overcome their disadvantage; a framing that has been criticised for perpetuating individualism and victim-blaming (Brookes et al., 2025; Ris, 2015; Spencer-Wood & Matthews, 2011; Williamson, 2017).

I take a slight issue with this narrative for a different reason. By framing character education in light of performance and achievement, it risks losing sight of the broader goal of developing the whole person (Williamson, 2017). Many conceptualisations within this perspective overlook moral virtues like honesty and civic virtues like service (Birdwell et al., 2015). Even when prosocial competencies, personal growth, and community engagement features are included, this is in the context of a narrow goal of academic and employment success.

For example, Character Lab does include moral and civic virtues within strengths of heart, but much of the research it foregrounds frames these qualities in terms of how they relate to school achievement and other performance-relevant outcomes (Heckman et al., 2019; Park et al., 2017). Similarly, the character development framework of KIPP focuses on college success.

Within non-cognitive, soft, and 21st century skills frameworks, character and related qualities are framed in an economic, business-driven discourse. Many of these frameworks are strongly shaped by the assumption that the primary purpose of education is preparation for a changing

workforce (e.g., Lisbon Council, 2007). Even the CCR, with its broader focus, frames character in the context of the business demands of the 21st century. In such framings, preparation for the modern workforce can become the dominant rationale, even where broader aims such as citizenship, ethics, or wellbeing are also acknowledged. Of particular mention here is ClassDojo, which is an educational technology company facilitated by financial and technical support from Silicon Valley venture capital sources, and frames education through an investment narrative centred on entrepreneurship and innovation (Williamson, 2017).

Education that is too closely organised around immediate economic demands risks losing sight of the unique individual situated within a specific community and of seeing a person only as a bundle of skills or behaviours or only through the lens of what economic role they fill in society (Apple, 1978; Mehta et al., 2020). This is further reflected in recent theoretical work by Rosenblad and Wheelahan (2025), which has questioned the very language of “skills” in education, arguing that this may flatten personhood and reduce complex human capacities to functional competencies shaped by labour-market priorities. Indeed, placing externally observed achievement at the forefront of educational aims risks valuing personal, social, and moral development for its contribution to success rather than as intrinsically worthwhile. As Carr and Harrison (2015) argue, this reflects a “narrow aim” of education, concerned with preparing students for higher education or employment rather than embracing a broader, holistic vision according to which schooling cannot and should not be reduced to such narrow, instrumental, performance-driven aims (Carr & Harrison, 2015; Kristjánsson, 2015).

Criticisms of 21st century skill frameworks also extend beyond their economic and achievement framing to concerns about letting “transient” cultural and corporate agendas drive education (Senechal, 2010). Together with the lack of consensus on what these skills actually encompass, this risks hasty and unsuccessful reforms (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). Senechal (2010) further argues that character education should be independent of society’s current needs and should stem instead from an enduring recognition of what it means to be human.

While the above is a critique of subjecting all character education to the aims of a 21st century framework for youth development, I would argue that there is value both in promoting skills that might lead to a more prepared workforce and in linking character-related qualities to the demands of the modern world. For example, meta-learning, which Sale (2020) considers to be

the superordinate 21st century competence, has some overlap with phronesis (considered a core human capacity) as a guiding competence, and may be particularly helpful for navigating today's complex, information-rich world (Kahneman, 2012). Therefore, in the current thesis, I draw on these frameworks and their evidence base as resources for curriculum design, while resisting an overall instrumental framing which assumes that their primary value lies in employability or attainment.

1.2.3.3 Ethical and flourishing-oriented questions in non-cognitive and social-emotional skills frameworks

Non-cognitive and social-emotional skills frameworks have also been criticised for sometimes incorporating moral and ethical development without making their underlying ethical assumptions explicit. References to ethics are common across non-cognitive and SEL skills frameworks (Carter et al., 2016). Some SEL frameworks include ethical decision-making, character development, or civic engagement within a broader social-emotional framework. Non-cognitive skills are also frequently linked to character formation and described as carrying moral valence (Almlund et al., 2011; Camfield, 2015). Kautz et al. (2014) even frame non-cognitive skill programmes as the secular equivalent to moral education, explaining that they prefer the term “non-cognitive skills” to avoid the moral connotations of “character.” However, where such approaches avoid the language of character in order to sidestep its “complicated history” (e.g., Schuelka et al., 2019), but do not replace it with an explicit account of ethical development, they risk leaving underexplained how prosocial and moral development occurs or why it matters.

In an analysis of the role of ethics within the SEL literature, Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) argue that SEL often either assumes social-emotional training will lead to ethical development without much discussion of research to back that claim or conflates SEL with ethics education. The first option occurs when SEL programmes avoid explicit ethical instruction, assuming emotional and social skills will naturally produce respectful, responsible citizens (Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 2003). However, scholars note that while emotion plays a role in moral development (Nucci, 2001), emotional and social competencies alone are morally neutral and can be used “for good or ill” (Elias et al., 2014). For example, empathy, central to Goleman's link between SEL and morality, does not guarantee moral outcomes; while it may promote compassion, it can just as easily underpin unjust favouritism (Batson et al., 1995; Decety &

Cowell, 2014). This does not mean that SEL is ethically empty; rather, it suggests that the ethical purposes and contexts of SEL need to be made explicit.

According to Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017), the second option may occur when SEL programmes include discussion of values and moral choices with young people without a broader framework. For example, many programmes that aim to promote prosocial behaviour do this without defining what this means and what it might look like across different settings (Stearns, 2016). Moreover, even promoting clearly defined prosocial behaviour may not satisfy the ends of character education, which is concerned with not just the outward behaviour, but the inner state of character and being, motivations for choosing to help or comfort another person, and autonomous moral reasoning (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2010). This critique is relevant to the current research because it helps explain why, although the programme studied uses SEL-informed activities and evidence concerning social-emotional competencies and implementation, this research is instead rooted in character education as its overarching framework.

These debates relate to a broader issue: SEL is not underpinned by a single unified foundational theory or ontology, which can create ambiguity about its ultimate aims, especially when it is translated into policy or standardised programmes (Goodman, 2024). Without greater clarity about underlying aims, it can become unclear whether SEL is being oriented primarily toward wellbeing, ethical development, behavioural adjustment, academic performance, employability, or some combination of these. In some policy or programme contexts, terms such as “regulation” and “control” may be interpreted narrowly, with the risk that SEL becomes oriented toward behavioural compliance, academic performance, or social mobility rather than toward emotional understanding, relational wellbeing, and holistic growth (Hoffman, 2009). As McMain and Strong (2021) note, “a continual emphasis on emotional self-management can lend itself to rigid definitions of ‘success,’ ‘appropriate skills,’ and ‘career readiness’ that privilege upward growth of the nation more than inward/outward growth of the people in it” (p. 6), reinforcing narrow definitions of success over holistic human growth. When SEL is framed primarily through labour-market or educational outcomes (e.g., OECD, 2015), it can reflect the mobility, achievement, and economic narratives discussed above, which is at odds with the non-instrumental account of development embraced by the current research.

A more balanced approach might involve connecting SEL practice more explicitly to broader theories of wellbeing and flourishing. While character education may be strengthened by SEL's empirical insights into social-emotional development, implementation, and school climate, SEL may also benefit from a clearer connection to broader accounts of flourishing and ethical development. Recent empirical work supports this convergence. For example, Hatchimonji et al. (2022) found that character virtues, SEL skills, and positive purpose complement each other, while Yuan et al. (2025) further suggest that integration of social-emotional and character development (SECD) approaches may support both student mental health and academic outcomes. This is the direction taken in the current research, which further grounds this convergence in developmental psychology and the ecological PYD framework.

1.2.4 Character within psychology

While mapping the study of character development, it is also worth noting how psychology has addressed character, especially since my own background and the theoretical framework I will present in Chapter 2 is informed by psychology. Early 20th-century psychologists like Thorndike (1911) viewed intellect and character as the two primary focuses of behaviourist psychology and wrote at length about moral and character formation (Beatty, 1998). Broadly speaking, before World War II, psychology's three aims included curing mental illness, enhancing life fulfilment, and nurturing talent (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), with character and virtue seen as key to human productivity and wellbeing (May et al., 1927; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

However, much of mainstream psychology, particularly after World War II, increasingly prioritised pathology, diagnosis, and the treatment of mental illness over the systematic study of human flourishing (McCullough & Snyder, 2000). This was accompanied by a shift from the language of character and virtue to that of personality traits, with figures like Allport arguing that the subject of character belonged to philosophy, not psychology (Allport & Vernon, 1930). Though thinkers like Dewey (1922/1998) defended the relevance of character in psychology, much of the field moved away from explicitly virtue-related research, often treating it as morally prescriptive, and towards more value-neutral, "objective" constructs. As a result, qualities such as integrity and honesty were less often studied explicitly as virtues within a scientific framework, leaving psychology without frameworks to address virtues critical to

personal and societal flourishing (McCullough & Snyder, 2000) and helping to explain why psychology-based frameworks often emphasise traits and skills rather than virtue-ethical concepts.

However, there are some notable exceptions to these shifts, with several scholars maintaining a focus on wellbeing, purpose, and qualities linked to flourishing-oriented character. For example, Erikson's psychosocial stages (1963, 1982) identified virtues such as trust, generativity, and integrity as key developmental outcomes. Ryff's (1989) six dimensions of wellbeing, which included self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose, and growth, further advanced this focus. Research on resilience (Kumpfer, 1999; Masten, 2001) and invulnerability (Anthony & Cohler, 1987) similarly highlighted internal strengths like hope, perseverance, and moral reasoning as protective factors against adversity, in line with the study of character.

Other exceptions to the shift away from a focus on human flourishing include existential and humanistic psychology, which emphasise human potential, autonomy, and the pursuit of meaning. Despite variations between them, these share a fundamental belief in human freedom, agency, and the potential for self-directed growth. Both emphasise holistic development of the entire person embedded in their context and focus on increasing self-awareness and personal responsibility (Wong, 2006). Existential psychology, influenced by philosophers like Kierkegaard and Heidegger, explores the search for meaning amidst life's anxieties and uncertainties, with Frankl highlighting the human capacity to find meaning even in dire circumstances (Frankl, 1984). Humanistic psychology, founded by Maslow and Rogers and influenced by figures such as Jung and James, is broadly associated with the hierarchy of needs. This suggests that once lower needs are sufficiently satisfied, humans, considered capable of making constructive choices to become their true self, are motivated to pursue higher needs, culminating in the motive for self-actualisation, which consists of "being" motives such as beauty, wonder, acceptance, and wholeness (Maslow, 1964; Rogers, 1959).

Together, these approaches propose that individuals have the potential to grow, build meaningful relationships, and act for the greater good (Wong, 2006). They also caution that fulfilment without ethical grounding can be hollow or harmful (Frankl, 1984; Maslow, 1970), even while maintaining an optimistic account of human potential, believing in an inherent drive

towards self-actualisation, guided by ideals like goodness and justice (Maslow, 1971). In this view, striving for fulfilment aligns with positive character development, including greater balance, compassion, and concern for justice (Wong, 2006).

The existential-humanistic perspective offers valuable insights for discussions on positive development and character. It shares with character education a holistic view of human nature and a focus on flourishing. Humanistic psychology, in particular, contrasts with much of 20th century psychology by emphasising life's *telos*, of meaning, transcendence, and flourishing, rooted in autonomy, integrity, and deep relationships (Maslow, 1970; Reilly & Narvaez, 2018). This expansive approach aligns with educational philosophies that advocate for broad, non-instrumental aims centred on human flourishing (Brighouse, 2006; de Ruyter, 2004), resonating with the core goals of character education.

However, existential-humanistic psychology has faced criticism for lacking scientific rigour, promoting individualism, and offering no clear ethical framework (Kristjánsson, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Taylor, 2001). Some of this criticism may be overstated, particularly where empirical critique rests on a narrow understanding of scientific rigour that undervalues qualitative research. Similarly, criticisms of a narcissist, self-help culture do not apply to most of the tradition, which is more in line with an Aristotelian, *eudaimonic* conception of flourishing (Held, 2004; Maslow, 1971; Reilly & Narvaez, 2018; Taylor, 2001). Still, this tradition does not offer a clear or unified virtue-ethical framework and does not explicitly address virtue in the same way as Aristotelian character education. It further differs from an Aristotelian view of flourishing in its focus on personal meaning-making over an inherent, naturalist view of human beings. These gaps are more directly tackled within positive psychology, which will be discussed below.

Alongside exceptions to psychology's shift away from flourishing, there were exceptions to the move from the language of character and virtue, deemed moral, toward the language of personality, deemed more neutral. Cawley et al. (2000) applied a virtues-based lens to personality. They used lexical analysis (e.g., "I ought to show ___ / be ___") and factor analysis, identifying four virtue factors: empathy, order, resourcefulness, and serenity. While the "ought" framing reflects a Kantian imperativeness at odds with Aristotelian virtue ethics, the study remains a rare example of virtues being explicitly examined within psychology. A more widely

known exception is moral development research, particularly work by Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1984), which traced development from rule-based morality to universal principles but focused primarily on moral reasoning rather than holistic character (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). In response to critiques from care ethicists (Noddings, 1984) and developmental psychologists (Blasi, 1980), neo-Kohlbergian work (Rest et al., 1999) broadened this approach to include moral sensitivity, motivation, and character, moving closer to a more comprehensive account of virtue.

Despite being a minority view, these approaches show that throughout the 20th century, psychology retained some engagement with character, linking it to wellbeing, maturity, and resilience. However, many classifications framed positive qualities as fixed personality traits, produced culturally biased lists, and lacked coherence between qualities. A more integrated approach emerged with Peterson and Seligman (2004) who, grounded in positive psychology, combined insights from moral philosophy and empirical research to produce the first comprehensive, systematic classification of character strengths and virtues within psychology.

1.2.4.1 Positive psychology and character

Positive psychology offers one influential integrative framework for much of the work on flourishing and character discussed above. Drawing partly on Aristotelian and eudaimonic ideas, it often views character as closely connected to, and in some accounts constitutive of, human flourishing. At the same time, it builds on humanistic psychology, retaining its focus on human potential and growth while offering a more structured, virtue-based account of wellbeing. It therefore provides a bridge between virtue ethics, constructs linked to meaning and thriving, and psychological measurement, making it relevant to the current research.

Defined as the study of positive experiences, traits, and the factors that make life worth living, positive psychology focuses on qualities such as hope, creativity, courage, and spirituality (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Dissatisfied with psychology's focus on pathology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi launched the movement in the late 1990s, shifting attention to wellbeing, later conceptualised through Seligman's PERMA model: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011).

According to Seligman (2019), character lies at the heart of positive psychology. Noting that psychology had long catalogued negative traits in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) without an equivalent taxonomy of virtues, he and Peterson developed the first comprehensive classification of character strengths and virtues, also referred to as the VIA classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). They proposed six virtues as broadly valued across moral traditions, each expressed through specific character strengths, understood as the psychological ingredients through which virtues are enacted. A key criterion for inclusion was that each strength be valued intrinsically rather than merely instrumentally, reflecting an expansive, non-instrumental view of character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Although framed differently, this is broadly compatible with an Aristotelian account that encompasses virtues and skills and with a view of character as involving personal transformation across all areas of life (Kristjánsson, 2013). The framework comprises 24 strengths grouped under six virtues (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Character Strengths and Virtues according to Peterson and Seligman (2004)



Note. Reprinted from “What Are Character Strengths & Virtues?” by J. Sutton, 23 Apr 2025, Copyright, 2025, PositivePsychology.com

A recent bibliometric review suggests that character strengths research has become a substantial and fast-growing area within positive psychology (Feraco & Casali, 2025). However, the field

is not without criticism, particularly in methodological terms. A major concern is its heavy reliance on standardised self-reports. Such measures are vulnerable to social desirability, response framing, interpretations, and the semantic cues activated by questions (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Fixed-term responses may also be shaped by central tendency bias (Douven, 2018) and are limited in their ability to capture nuance beyond fixed-response options. This is especially problematic in the study of character, which encompasses not just beliefs but intentions, judgements, and more holistic states of being (Kristjánsson, 2010).

A related criticism relates to the lack of qualitative research in positive psychology (van Zyl et al., 2024). The field has often privileged quantitative methods, large samples, and statistical analysis as markers of scientific rigour (Seligman, 2011), thereby underestimating the value of qualitative and mixed-method approaches, which can offer rich data and profound insights into human experience, meaning, and fulfilment (Kristjánsson, 2013). These critiques foreshadow the approach adopted in this thesis, which emphasises lived experience and meaning making through qualitative exploration and treats standardised measures as complementary to, rather than replacements for, qualitative accounts of development.

A further criticism relates to the word “positive”. Scholars have warned against a potential “tyranny of the positive attitude” (Held, 2004), where individuals feel pressured to maintain positive emotions and may experience guilt or inadequacy when they do not. Critics also note that “positive emotion” is ambiguous and that negative emotions such as regret, disappointment, or compassion for pain can play an important role in reflection, healing, and moral action (Nussbaum, 2008; van Zyl et al., 2024). That said, many of these critiques apply more to earlier stages of the movement. Contemporary positive psychology acknowledges the role of negative emotions in flourishing (Peterson, 2006) and cautions against forms of positivity detached from character strengths and virtues, which it sees as empty and lacking in meaning (Kristjánsson, 2010; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003).

Despite these criticisms, positive psychology offers significant contributions to character education, providing not only a classification of virtues but also empirical insights into happiness, wellbeing, and flourishing, long considered central aims of character development. This thesis draws on these contributions, while grounding its developmental account in PYD (Chapter 2).

1.2.5 The aim of character education: flourishing and wellbeing

The narrative of character education adopted in this thesis is one of flourishing and wellbeing, seen as both the essence and aim of character growth. This follows both Aristotelian and positive psychology perspectives, which see character strengths and virtues as both constituents of, and pathways towards, a flourishing life (Kristjánsson, 2015, 2016; Seligman, 2002, 2011). It stands in stark contrast to moral deficit, poverty and social mobility, and narrowly defined achievement-oriented narratives. The first two are especially incompatible with a strength-based emphasis on young people's capacities rather than their risks. This view also resonates with modern educational philosophy which frames Aristotelian flourishing as the overarching aim of education (Brighouse, 2006; de Ruyter, 2004), updated to reflect contemporary concerns such as social justice and insights from the scientific study of character strengths (Allen, 2018; Arthur et al., 2021). This conception has been presented as potentially bridging cultural and religious divides by focusing on widely recognised aspects of human flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2013).

A brief note on terminology: Aristotle's *eudaimonia* has been variously translated as happiness, flourishing, and wellbeing. While earlier translations often favoured "happiness," more recent scholarship prefers "flourishing" because it suggests a more objective, enduring state (Kristjánsson, 2013). Positive psychology, however, has not always used these terms consistently and has often used happiness, wellbeing, and flourishing interchangeably. Moreover, not all positive psychology accounts align with Aristotelian thought. Kahneman's (1999) hedonic account, for example, emphasises subjective affect and experienced pleasure, understood as a transient subjective state aimed at maximising enjoyable experiences. As a framework for positive development, this raises the long-noted concern of pursuing pleasure without ethical grounding (Maslow, 1970), and it does not straightforwardly map onto long-term flourishing. A second approach, the life-satisfaction account, exemplified by Peterson and Seligman's (2004) deathbed test which asks people to imagine completing the sentence "I wish I had spent more time ____" at the end of their life, links happiness to the achievement of personal goals. Yet this kind of happiness may also be unstable, since both motivation and satisfaction can vary over time and context.

By contrast, Seligman's later account moves closer to an Aristotelian, *eudaimonic* conception of wellbeing as more objective and enduring than momentary pleasure or life satisfaction alone. In "Flourish," Seligman (2011) explicitly distances himself from his earlier emphasis on life satisfaction, describing it as too closely tied to fleeting cheerfulness rather than deep and enduring fulfilment. This reorientation underpins the PERMA model and a greater emphasis on moral virtues as conducive to wellbeing. Although some moral philosophers object to PERMA's pluralism (e.g., including the pursuit of positive emotions as one of the pathways to flourishing), it remains broadly aligned with Aristotelian ideals. Even Kristjánsson (2013) acknowledges that this view approaches an Aristotelian conception of flourishing due to its insistence that wellbeing "cannot exist just in your head" (Seligman, 2011; p. 25) and its grounding in moral virtue.

This thesis follows Aristotelian-inspired positive psychologists in framing growth in character through a wellbeing and flourishing lens. It rests on two assumptions. The first is that cultivating character strengths and virtues is conducive to fulfilment and to an objective state of flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2015; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011). Recent evidence is consistent with this claim. A meta-analysis found that character strengths are meaningfully associated with both wellbeing and mental health, with particularly strong associations for hope, zest, gratitude, love, curiosity, and self-regulation (Casali & Feraco, 2025). Similarly, recent evidence suggests that moral character is positively associated with both wellbeing and meaning in life (Sun et al., 2025).

The second assumption is that character growth, and indeed education itself, is a meaningful goal in and of itself, reflecting a non-instrumental, expansive view of education. Such a view is beautifully described by Senechal (2010) who argues that at its fullest and best, education exists not only to prepare individuals for civic life, integrity, and meaningful work, but also for solitude, for knowing how to be alone without distraction, escapism or boredom, and ultimately "for its own sake: an endless adventure, a struggle, a delight" (p.10). While character development undoubtedly supports achievement, performance, and individual and social wellbeing (Wigelsworth, 2019), this narrative emphasises its intrinsic value. Character strengths and virtues are viewed not merely as instruments of external success, but as constitutive of flourishing and worthwhile in their own right (Carr & Harrison, 2015; Seligman, 2019).

1.3 Broader problems with character education and related terms and frameworks

The above sections set the stage for the Aristotelian-inspired, flourishing-oriented positive psychology view of character. However, alongside the enduring lack of developmental grounding, two broader problems remain that point towards the need for a stronger developmental foundation: the need to acknowledge context and the need to incorporate a social justice orientation.

1.3.1 The need to acknowledge context

There are growing calls for character education and related fields such as SEL research to reflect more critically on both their cultural assumptions and the contexts in which they are implemented (e.g., Feraco & Casali, 2025; Owen et al., 2025). For example, some versions of SEL, particularly when positioned as universalised or standardised frameworks, have been criticised for promoting a one-size-fits-all model “based on White male regimes of truth” (Ciofalo et al., 2022, p. 3) and “Western, rational modes of knowing” (McMain & Strong, 2021, p. 11). Critics argue that researchers can overlook the tacit cultural biases shaping their work (Hamedani & Markus, 2019) and that marginalised voices have often been underrepresented in theories, frameworks, and literature (McMain & Strong, 2021). Even in cross-cultural studies, cultural diversity can be reduced to questions of access rather than incorporated into the conceptual basis of SEL (Goodman, 2024). It has therefore been argued that there is a need for more collaborative, context-responsive approaches, especially where prescriptive or Western-framed versions of SEL clash with particular cultural norms, such as the Samoan values of love, service, and reciprocity (Goodman, 2024; Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024; Taleni & Surtees, 2024).

This criticism extends to many of the other frameworks discussed above. While the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue (2017, 2024) encourages contextual adaptation, many classifications of character strengths, non-cognitive skills, soft skills, and 21st century skills have not adequately addressed cultural diversity and alternative ways of relating, being, and doing (e.g., García, 2016; Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Lippman et al., 2015). Recent review work on character strengths similarly highlights the predominance of WEIRD contexts and the need

for more cross-cultural inquiry (Feraco & Casali, 2025). For the current research, this reinforces the need for a framework that treats development as embedded within cultural and ecological systems rather than as a decontextualised set of universal traits or skills.

Contextual limitations are not only cultural. Youth development frameworks, including character education and SEL, also need to account more fully for other dimensions of individual and environmental context, including personal resources, family and peer settings, local neighbourhoods, and broader social and political structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Character and SEL programmes do not always adapt sufficiently to such variability (e.g., Stearns, 2016), despite the fact that definitions and expressions of positive qualities and prosocial behaviour vary across communities. Contexts provide different norms, starting points, strengths, and challenges, meaning that both expressions of and pathways to social, emotional, and moral development will vary. This does not mean that universal approaches are necessarily decontextualised; rather, it suggests that such approaches need to be implemented through careful attention to local school ethos, relationships, staff engagement, and pupils' lived experiences. Environmental factors have likewise been found to play a significant role in shaping human character (Casali et al., 2024). As Owen et al. (2025) argue, the field therefore requires a stronger ecological ontology, since acknowledging the contexts in which young people are embedded and tailoring programmes accordingly is essential for ensuring meaningful and equitable outcomes in youth development efforts. This ecological emphasis provides a key bridge to the theoretical framework of both the programme and this thesis, introduced in Chapter 2.

1.3.2 The need to incorporate a social justice orientation

A lack of contextual awareness in character education also highlights the need to incorporate a social justice orientation into related frameworks. Moral deficit and social mobility narratives, which present character education as a means of decreasing youth immorality, addressing inequality, or fixing a “Broken Britain” (Reeves, 2014), fail to acknowledge the deeper cultural, political, historical, socio-economic, and power structures that drive injustice, marginalisation, and oppression. A similar concern applies to narratives that discuss non-cognitive and social-emotional skills primarily in terms of social mobility and economic progress (e.g., OECD, 2015).

Importantly, this problem can extend beyond explicit deficit or mobility framings. Many mainstream character education narratives associated with the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, Character Lab, positive psychology, and some SEL frameworks have been criticised for giving limited attention to these deeper structural issues. In some formulations, they imply that individual and societal success, achievement, and flourishing result primarily from personal growth, introspection, and self-improvement. This overlooks how structural inequalities shape access to flourishing. Kristjánsson (2013) argues that proponents defending this model typically adopt one of two positions: that societal transformation begins with individual transformation, or that targeting individuals is a more pragmatic first step than large-scale systemic reform. Though intended to be empowering, both responses are limited. Where approaches focus on the decontextualised individual and neglect class, ethnicity, and power structures, they risk overlooking real barriers to flourishing such as food insecurity, poverty, and health inequality (Walsh, 2017).

This has several implications. First, it can limit effectiveness by leaving key obstacles unaddressed and misdirecting policy and practice (Strambler, 2025). Second, as discussed above, a failure to acknowledge structural transformation and instead targeting poverty solely through individual change has been called “morally repugnant” (Becker & Marecek, 2008, p. 1771), as it places responsibility on those harmed by injustice rather than on the systems that sustain it. This risks reinforcing inequality by implying that personal shortcomings, rather than structural conditions, are to blame (Kirchgasler, 2018).

Third, failing to consider the realities faced by marginalised groups risks making character education elitist and irrelevant for many (Strambler, 2025). This is especially significant given the exclusionary roots of Aristotelian ethics: Aristotle restricted flourishing to a privileged few, sustained by the subjugation of others (Simpson, 2000; Walsh, 2017). Although contemporary character education rejects these views, it must grapple with its exclusionary foundations and address whose flourishing is being served.

Fourth, and related to the above, an approach to character education that is overly individualising and insufficiently attentive to context also risks undermining its own stated commitments to moral virtue and justice. While the *Framework for Character Education*

(2024) highlights justice as a core virtue, principles of social justice and concerns for the systemic barriers facing the most vulnerable remain largely absent from its narrative. This gap is illustrated by Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three models of citizenship: the personally responsible citizen, who acts ethically and helps others (e.g., donating to a food drive); the participatory citizen, who takes active leadership in community efforts (e.g., organising the drive); and the justice-oriented citizen, who critically examines and challenges the root causes of injustice (e.g., questioning why people are hungry). The authors argue that most narratives and programmes aimed at building good character fall into the first category. This reflects the assumption discussed above that social issues can be solved by encouraging individuals to be honest, responsible, and have integrity (Arthur et al., 2016; Kristjánsson, 2013). However, assumptions such as "if I were individually responsible, the world would be a better place. There wouldn't be racism," miss problems that are "bigger than the self" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 259) and therefore fail to capture the broader meaning of the virtue of justice.

Importantly, none of the above dismisses the importance of localised efforts to support personal responsibility and the practice of helping others. It simply highlights that character education needs to take a clear stance on these issues. Rather than dismissing social justice critiques as irrelevant, the field should integrate them into its narrative and explicitly address structural inequality, recognising social justice as a form of virtue and virtuous action (Kristjánsson, 2013; Walsh, 2017). It must also ensure that character education is relevant to all young people, regardless of background or circumstance. One approach which considers the immediate and broader context in which individuals are embedded and which may offer a way forward is Positive Youth Development (PYD). The next chapter therefore introduces PYD as a developmental framework that explicitly foregrounds systems, context, and the relational conditions through which thriving becomes possible.

Chapter 2 The Positive Youth Development (PYD) theoretical framework

This research draws from the above sections an expansive, non-instrumental, flourishing-oriented conceptualisation of character, inclusive of a broad range of non-cognitive, social, and emotional qualities. Its primary focus, however, is on how character growth and flourishing among children aged 9-11 may be supported in practice. To address this aim, the research is grounded in the theoretical framework of Positive Youth Development (PYD), a multidisciplinary approach concerned with supporting young people's positive development within their specific contexts as they transition towards adolescence.

Several key elements define the PYD approach. First, it is explicitly strength-based, emphasising the cultivation of young people's existing capacities rather than focusing on deficits or risk. PYD gained prominence at the turn of the century partly in response to earlier "storm and stress" approaches to adolescence, which tended to frame youth development primarily in terms of pathology or vulnerability (Freud, 1969; Hall, 1904). In contrast, PYD was influenced by humanistic and existential traditions that foregrounded meaning, agency, and self-actualisation and overlaps with character education and positive psychology in its interest in what constitutes "the good" in human life. From this perspective, young people are understood not as problems to be managed, but as possessing inherent potential for positive growth and thriving (Roth et al., 1998). In line with this orientation, PYD attends to both personal (internal) and contextual (external) resources as protective and promotive factors in development and it emphasises each individual's active role in their own development (Martin-Barrado & Gomez-Baya, 2024a).

Second, PYD is grounded in a rigorous ecological theory of human development (Bowers et al., 2015). Two specific theories that underpin the PYD approach are Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework and Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) (Lerner et al., 2015). These emphasise children's developmental needs in their specific context, including family, peer, and school context, as well as broader cultural, social, and political settings. This systemic focus is a central reason for adopting PYD as the theoretical framework for the present research. Rather than isolating individual traits or behaviours, it emphasises the dynamic interplay between young people and the environments in which they are embedded. A key PYD principle that flows from this is the focus on specific young people in specific contexts at specific times

(Lerner et al., 2015). This may be particularly relevant for youth mentoring, which can itself be framed as one such person-context relation and which may provide a means of delivering tailored support to specific young people in their unique contexts (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

Third, and relatedly, more recent PYD work has incorporated an explicit social justice lens. Because PYD is concerned with the alignment between young people's strengths and the opportunities and constraints present in their environments, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised questions of youth voice and equitable access to developmental resources. Reviewing developments in the field, Lerner et al. (2021) suggest that PYD is increasingly concerned with ensuring fair access to the relationships, opportunities, and resources needed for healthy development, especially for young people affected by marginalisation. Such PYD-informed approaches attend to the specific resources and constraints present in particular communities and treat young people as active participants in their own development. They do this by incorporating their voices into programme design, supporting their autonomy, and strengthening their capacity to shape the conditions of their own thriving, while remaining sensitive to the ways in which race, ethnicity, culture, and adversity shape the forms that thriving may take for different youth (Barbarin et al., 2020; Brittian Loyd & Williams, 2017; Lerner et al., 2021).

These defining elements position PYD as a coherent developmental framework through which to interpret the flourishing-oriented, expansive account of character developed in Chapter 1. Importantly, as Chapters 3 and 4 will argue, they also provide a way to frame character-focused youth mentoring, setting the stage for PYD as the organising framework not only for this thesis's account of character, but for its exploration of how mentors and children experience a youth mentoring programme with a character-focused curriculum. The following sections expand on these defining elements to provide a comprehensive account of PYD and why it forms the theoretical framework for this research.

2.1 The Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) ecological perspective

The PYD approach is underpinned by the Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) framework, which shares with Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective an emphasis on development as embedded within interconnected contexts. According to ecological systems

theory, a child's behaviour and outcomes arise from the dynamic interplay between their individual characteristics, their immediate environments, and broader social structures. Bronfenbrenner proposed a model of five nested systems, each influencing development in relation to the others. The *microsystem* refers to bidirectional interactions with parents, peers, teachers, health professionals, and others who have direct contact with the child; the *mesosystem* captures interactions between these contexts; the *exosystem* encompasses indirect influences such as neighbourhoods or parental workplaces; the *macrosystem* reflects cultural values and socio-economic factors; and finally, the *chronosystem* accounts for developmental and historical change over time.

Bronfenbrenner later refined this framework through the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), placing greater emphasis on the individual and on developmental processes. In this adapted model, development is understood as emerging through ongoing interactions (process) between a person's attributes, genetic features, skills, and resources (person), their ecological environments, which include the first four nested systems (context), and temporal change (time).

Bronfenbrenner's framework remains highly influential, largely because it foregrounds the simple yet powerful idea that children develop within multiple interacting systems rather than in isolation. However, its breadth has also attracted criticism. Empirically testing ecological interactions is challenging, as isolating the relative contribution of different systems requires complex, multidisciplinary designs (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Critics have also argued that the framework underplays certain dimensions of ecological development, including human-nature relationships and environmental factors such as toxins or climate conditions (Elliott & Davis, 2020; Krishnan, 2010). Others suggest it insufficiently incorporates resilience processes, international factors such as globalisation and ideology, and psychosocial and cognitive developmental stage theories (Christensen, 2010; Engler, 2007).

Despite these limitations, a substantial body of research continues to support the ecological perspective as a useful organising framework for understanding and supporting positive child development. It has been applied across a wide range of domains including as a framework for understanding school-community partnerships (Leonard, 2011), improving academic outcomes

through parental involvement (Seginer, 2006) and classroom interactions (Lippard et al., 2018), targeting bullying through whole-school approaches (Pearce et al., 2011), and supporting youth social and emotional wellbeing through whole-school and ecological approaches (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014). As such, Bronfenbrenner's model provides an important conceptual foundation for the PYD framework adopted in this research, reinforcing recent arguments that character development must be understood through a stronger and more versatile ecological perspective attentive to the interdependence of young people and their environments (Owen et al., 2025).

Within the broader ecological perspective, PYD is primarily grounded in the Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) framework (Bowers et al., 2015). Developed in contrast to Cartesian notions of human development (Descartes, 1952; Lerner, 2021; Mehta, 2011), RDS rejects reductionist separations between nature and nurture and instead emphasises the integration of “a brain, a body, and a culture” (Marshall, 2009, p. 120).

Central to RDS are the principles of holism and relationism. Based on the principle that “wholes define parts and parts define wholes” (Overton, 2013, p. 98), holism deals with the meaning of constructs within their contexts, while relationism, or a process-oriented ontology of becoming, views development as emerging from dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments. From this perspective, human development cannot be explained solely by individual traits or environmental influences; instead, it arises through the interaction of a variety of biological, psychological, cultural, social, and other processes (Bell, 2019; Overton, 2013). RDS is concerned less with determining the relative weight of individual factors and more with understanding how they come together in specific contexts and interact over multiple levels of context to form qualitatively different properties, new complexities, and developmental change (Lerner et al., 2015; Overton, 2013).

RDS refers to the mutually influential interactions between a unique individual and their changing context as *developmental regulations*. Positive youth development is seen as occurring when these interactions are *adaptive*, or mutually beneficial, meaning that young people's strengths and needs align with opportunities and resources in their environments (Lerner et al., 2011). This frames development as an emergent process shaped by ongoing person-context relations.

RDS has become an influential framework in contemporary developmental science (Ettetal et al., 2017; Lerner et al., 2015) and will also form the theoretical underpinnings of this research. Its comprehensiveness, while making it challenging to evaluate and operationalise, reflects the complexity of development during late childhood and early adolescence characterised by rapid biological, cognitive, and social changes, such as shifts in dopamine levels, brain connectivity, peer dynamics, increased risk-taking, and more (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2013). In terms of its practical application to youth development, RDS suggests that research and practice should focus on strengthening *adaptive developmental regulations* for helping specific young people at specific times in specific places grow by aligning their capacities with supportive relationships, resources, and opportunities in their environments. This provides a particularly useful lens for understanding the processes through which children's development is supported in the current research.

2.2 Approaches to Positive Youth Development

The following section first reviews a selection of PYD-framed models of development in order to clarify core PYD principles that will later inform this thesis's interpretation of character-focused mentoring. These include the idea that development is shaped by the fit between specific young people and their environments, by opportunities for agency and meaning making, and by the availability of relational and contextual assets. This is followed by a review of PYD approaches to youth programmes, specifying how these principles can be translated into design features such as sustained relationships, skill-building activities, and opportunities for participation. Since the present research focuses on late childhood (ages 9-11), this section then considers why this developmental period may be a particularly consequential window for PYD-oriented programming. Finally, it introduces the Five Cs model as a widely used PYD framework which provides a basis for programme evaluation.

2.2.1 PYD as a systems-focused developmental process

Several models have been developed within the RDS perspective to explain how youth development unfolds in context. Key frameworks include Eccles' (1993) stage-environment fit, Larson's (2006) model of youth initiative, Damon's (2008) model of purpose, Spencer's (2006a) model of youth perception, and Benson's (2003) developmental assets model. Eccles' theory of stage-environment fit highlights the importance of aligning developmental contexts

with young people's evolving needs. Research on the transition to secondary school found that disengagement often emerges from poorly designed environments, such as greater teacher control at a time when young people need greater autonomy (Eccles, 1993; Wang & Eccles, 2013). From this perspective, positive youth development requires contexts that are developmentally responsive rather than uniformly structured (Eccles, 2004).

Building on this, Larson's (2006) model of youth initiative emphasises initiative and motivation, arguing that young people thrive when they take an active role in shaping their development. Well-designed after-school activities are key in fostering initiative, responsibility, leadership, and collaboration, although their impact depends on programme quality and structure (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). Damon's (2008) model of purpose complements this by conceptualising purpose as the intention to accomplish something both personally meaningful and directed toward the common good, aligning identity with contribution and positioning this connection as central to PYD and youth thriving (Benson et al., 2011; Burkhard et al., 2019; Damon, 2008).

Spencer's phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) further extends ecological approaches by foregrounding individual experience and perception. It proposes that developmental outcomes depend not only on contextual conditions but also on how young people interpret and make meaning of their experiences, as similar circumstances can be experienced differently by different people (Spencer, 2006a; Spencer, Swanson, & Harpalani, 2015). Finally, Benson's (2003) 40 Developmental Assets model integrates internal capacities with external supports, describing 20 internal assets (e.g., social competencies, positive values, commitment to learning, positive identity) alongside 20 external assets (e.g., relationships, social expectations, opportunities for participation). Empirical work links higher levels of these assets to improved academic outcomes, wellbeing, and psychological adjustment, and to reduced risk behaviours (Benson et al., 2011; Martin-Barrado & Gomez-Baya, 2024a).

Although distinct, these PYD-framed models all conceptualise development as emerging through dynamic, reciprocal relations between individuals and their contexts. Collectively, they view young people as capable, meaning-making agents with the potential to thrive under supportive conditions and highlight key principles that inform this research, including the importance of developmentally responsive environments, youth agency and identity formation, meaning making, supportive relationships, and the alignment of internal and external assets.

2.2.2 Approaches to PYD as a model for youth programming

Another core tenet of PYD is its focus on how youth programmes can optimise development. PYD researchers emphasise creating individual and contextual conditions that support healthy developmental change (Ettekal et al., 2017). In their review of programmes promoting positive youth development, Eccles and Gootman (2002) conceptualised PYD in terms of the assets young people need to become competent adults, including physical, intellectual, psychological, and social resources. They argued that successful programmes foster safety, supportive relationships, and positive social norms, while aligning their work with families and wider community partners.

Several complementary frameworks converge in outlining key features of effective PYD programmes. Blum (2003) identifies three central elements: (1) people, referring to strong adult-child relationships, (2) place, meaning safe and supervised environments, and (3) contribution, or opportunities for meaningful participation. Similarly, Lerner (2004) highlights the “big three”: (1) sustained relationships with adults, (2) life-skill building activities, and (3) opportunities for youth leadership and community involvement, with clear overlap across these models, particularly in their first and third elements.

Catalano et al. (2004) extend Lerner’s second element by specifying 15 PYD constructs, which can loosely be grouped into four broad domains: (1) social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and moral competence; (2) a positive identity, self-efficacy, self-determination, resilience, and optimism; (3) bonding with peers and community; and (4) fostering prosocial norms, recognition for positive behaviour, and opportunities for contribution. In line with Blum’s second element, they further emphasise the importance of integrating multiple developmental targets, maintaining structured curricula, measuring outcomes, and ensuring high-quality implementation.

These principles are reinforced in recent systematic review evidence. Drawing on the YouthPower Learning PYD framework (International Center for Research on Women, 2020), Donovan et al. (2025) identify four core domains of PYD: (1) assets, meaning skills and resources, (2) agency and autonomy, (3) community involvement, and (4) an enabling environment. They similarly emphasise the importance of participatory and contextual conditions that enable youth contribution and ecological change, alongside programme quality,

implementation, and robust evaluation. This is also consistent with systemic and transformative social-emotional learning (SEL) scholarship, which emphasises skills instruction within relationship-rich environments, school-family-community partnerships, youth voice and agency, and context-sensitive practices adapted to young people's strengths and needs (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Mahoney & Weissberg, 2019; Meyers et al., 2015).

These frameworks reveal strong convergence in how effective youth programmes are conceptualised. Across models, there is a consistent emphasis on combining strong relational support with structured, supervised opportunities for skill-building, identity development, agency, and meaningful participation in social contexts. As in the theoretical models above, this convergence reflects a shared paradigm that positions young people as possessing strengths and potential that can be developed through supportive, opportunity-rich environments. In line with this literature, the present research focuses on adult-child relationships, supervised activities, peer connection, and the development of qualities linked to social, emotional, and moral competence, self-efficacy, and positive identity (see section 4.3).

2.2.3 The significance of late childhood for PYD-oriented programming

While PYD frameworks typically span childhood and adolescence (e.g., ages 6-20 in Catalano et al., 2004), the present research focuses on late childhood (ages 9-11). This subsection therefore briefly justifies late childhood as a PYD-relevant developmental window, since several of the principles emphasised in PYD, such as relational sensitivity and identity-relevant meaning making, show marked change during this period.

The period of late childhood, just preceding adolescence, is characterised by substantial emotional, social, and cognitive changes relevant to PYD, character, and flourishing, including increasing self-reflection, awareness of one's inner characteristics, perspective-taking, and a growing capacity to act in accordance with a sense of right and wrong (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2013). It is also a time in which children's self-understanding becomes more differentiated, their personal values become increasingly organised, and their executive function capacities become more developed, with growing implications for behavioural self-regulation, emotional control, and the enactment of character strengths (Best & Miller, 2010; Daniel et al., 2024; Markus & Nurius, 1984).

Late childhood is also a period of heightened social sensitivity. A substantial body of research suggests that susceptibility to social influence is high in this age range (Knoll et al., 2015; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007), and this crucially includes prosocial influence. For example, Foulkes et al. (2018) examined the impact of prosocial influence among participants aged 8-59 and found that children aged 8-11 were the most susceptible, suggesting that relationships can be particularly powerful in supporting positive development at this stage. In parallel, perceived support from adults across home, school, and neighbourhood contexts in this age range is associated with wellbeing, while peer belonging and supportive adult relationships at this age predict later optimism (Oberle et al., 2014, 2018).

In the Scottish context, where this research is situated, this is especially significant because ages 9-11 span the final years of primary school (P6-P7), immediately prior to the transition to secondary school. Research conducted in UK and Scottish contexts frames the primary-secondary transition as a significant socio-emotional period and highlights the importance of children's emotional wellbeing not only after the transition but also in the period leading up to it (Bagnall et al., 2025; Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023; Scottish Government, 2021). From a PYD perspective, this supports the case for strengthening relational and developmental assets in late childhood as foundations for a healthier transition into adolescence and secondary school. The implications of this for the design of the mentoring programme studied in this research are discussed in Chapter 4.

2.2.4 The Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development

One of the most widely used models of Positive Youth Development (PYD) is the Five Cs model, initially proposed by Pittman et al. (2003) and further developed by Lerner et al. (2005). Building on earlier work by Little et al. (1993), the model conceptualises positive development through five interrelated factors:

- (1) Competence,
- (2) Confidence,
- (3) Connection,
- (4) Character, and
- (5) Caring or compassion.

Competence refers to social, cognitive, academic, and vocational abilities such as problem solving, school achievement, work habits, and conflict resolution. *Confidence* includes self-efficacy and a positive sense of self-worth. *Connection* captures positive two-way relationships with people and organisations. *Character*, defined in moral terms, involves integrity and respect for norms, while *Caring* reflects empathy and compassion (Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Geldhof et al., 2015).

The model proposes that these Five Cs emerge when young people's personal strengths align with resources available in their environments, which may include the presence of supportive adults and youth programmes. Higher levels of the Five Cs are associated with reduced depressive symptoms and risk behaviours and improved psychological functioning. They are also thought to give rise to a "sixth C" outcome, *Contribution*. In other words, young people exhibiting positive development in the form of the Five Cs are more likely to behave in a way that will benefit their families, friends, and the communities in which they live, aligning closely with RDS theory.

The model has been widely studied, most notably through the 4-H Study of PYD, which developed a measurement tool to assess the Five Cs (Lerner et al., 2005). This has shown good internal consistency as well as construct and predictive validity (Jeličić et al., 2007), leading to the subsequent development of different versions of the measure, including the PYD Short Form (34-item) and the PYD Very Short Form (17-item), which allow for quicker administration and enable broader application in research and programme evaluation (Geldhof et al., 2014).

Yet the model does not come without criticism. Although the Five Cs framework has substantial empirical support, concerns have been raised about the distinctiveness of the five domains, with studies suggesting overlap between Cs and shared underlying processes (for example, a general thriving/adjustment factor reflected across competence, confidence, and connection) (Chen et al., 2018; Conway et al., 2015). Bifactor analysis further suggests that a broad general PYD factor can account for much of the reliable variance, which may obscure interpretation of the domain-specific subscales (Dvorsky et al., 2019). In contrast, more recent Rasch analyses of the Very Short Form suggest that the structure of PYD may be more nuanced than a single higher-order factor in all contexts (Bergman et al., 2025). Conceptual critiques have also been

raised. For example, evidence on *caring* suggests that higher levels may not always be adaptive once overall PYD is controlled for (e.g., due to over-arousal or distress in some young people), challenging a simple “more is better” interpretation of all five components (Geldhof et al., 2019).

Despite these critiques, the model has been described as one of the most empirically supported PYD frameworks (Heck & Subramaniam, 2009). It has been adopted across diverse cultural contexts, including Europe, America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania (Conway et al., 2015; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Martin-Barrado & Gomez-Baya, 2024b), with findings broadly supporting the notion that the Five Cs operate both as domain-specific indicators of wellbeing and as a composite measure of youth thriving, predicting higher levels of contribution and lower levels of risk behaviours (Jeličić et al., 2007). This strong measurement base, alongside its ecological grounding, makes it a useful organising framework for aiding curriculum evaluation in youth programmes and examining character growth and holistic development within youth mentoring contexts.

2.3 PYD as an integrative framework for character-focused mentoring

Taken together, the models reviewed in this chapter position PYD as a useful organising framework for the current research. First, PYD’s grounding in the RDS perspective provides a theoretically robust account of development that emphasises the multiple levels of context within which young people function. It frames development as emerging through dynamic person-context relations, making it particularly useful for studying youth mentoring, which is itself a relational intervention. This ecological perspective also places contextual conditions close to the centre of its framework, including in recent work linking ecological development to equity, youth voice, and fair access to the relationships, opportunities, and resources needed for thriving (Lerner et al., 2021).

Using PYD as the theoretical framework does not mean setting aside the character education or related literatures reviewed in Chapter 1. Rather, PYD provides the developmental and ecological structure within which insights from these literatures can be integrated. Character education contributes the central concern with an Aristotelian notion of character, developed within positive psychology, and frames whole-person flourishing, encompassing virtue ethics

and moral growth, as a worthwhile aim of development. It also foregrounds a non-instrumental “being” as well as a “doing” orientation: it is interested not only in skills, behaviours, and competencies, but also in a child’s inner world, their motivations, judgements, meaning making, values, and their developing sense of self. SEL contributes the inclusion of a focus on social-emotional competencies and evidence-informed structured activities (Elias et al., 2014; Hatchimonji et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2025). PYD brings these together by asking how qualities that enable flourishing are supported through the alignment of young people’s strengths, identity, and agency with relationships, opportunities, activities, and resources in their environments (Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2006; Shek et al., 2019; Tolan et al., 2016).

This also has implications for programme design and interpretation. A PYD lens centres the importance of youth agency and active participation (Larson, 2006; Tolan et al., 2016). It also suggests that structured activities are most meaningful when they are not delivered as uniform lessons alone, but are mediated through relationships, adapted to individual children, and connected to young people’s own experiences, strengths, and contexts (Lerner et al., 2011; Tolan et al., 2016). This is especially relevant for one-to-one mentoring, where mentors may be able to meet children where they are, tailor activities to their interests and needs, support reflection, and create space for young people’s own interpretations and choices.

Overall, the programme studied in this thesis is character-focused in its aims and focus and SEL-informed in some of its curriculum topics and practices, while ultimately grounded in PYD as the overarching framework for interpreting character-focused mentoring as a relational, personalised, and context-sensitive process of positive development. This integration is represented visually in Part A of the integrated PYD model of character-focused youth mentoring, presented in the opening synthesis of Chapter 8 (Figure 17).

Chapter 3 Literature review of youth mentoring

Within the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD), mentoring has emerged as a promising approach to supporting children's development. This typically involves a more experienced, usually older, individual providing guidance and support to a less experienced, usually younger, individual. There is broad consensus that such relationships with committed and caring adults are central to optimal youth development (Blum, 2003; Lerner, 2004), whether these relationships occur with parents, natural mentors, or formal programme mentors (Li & Julian, 2012; Theokas & Lerner, 2006).

Mentoring aligns closely with the ecological and relational assumptions of PYD, particularly Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) theory, which emphasises the dynamic interaction between young people and their contexts (Overton, 2015). Because mentoring often involves close one-to-one support, it may be especially well positioned to facilitate developmentally responsive interactions tailored to specific young people in specific contexts (Lerner et al., 2015). As a relational intervention, mentoring is also associated with interpersonal and prosocial development (Austin et al., 2020) and may contribute to the Five Cs of PYD. For example, mentors may expand social networks, fostering *connection*, and promote awareness of others, supporting *caring*, and engage in dialogue and shared deliberation that helps young people consider the consequences of their actions, internalise social norms, and develop forms of practical judgement associated with *character* (JCCV, 2017; Torney-Purta & Lopez, 2006).

Before examining further how mentoring relationships might influence PYD and character development, this chapter sets the stage for the current research. It reviews the literature on youth mentoring, critically considers different mentoring models and formats, and analyses factors associated with effective mentoring relationships. These themes are later drawn together in Chapter 4, which presents the current research and the mentoring programme it examines.

3.1 An introduction to youth mentoring

3.1.1 The importance of positive relationships for development

There is wide consensus across developmental science that positive relationships are foundational to healthy development. As Cavell, Spencer, and McQuillin (2021) note when discussing the foundations of youth mentoring: “It is a truism that relationships matter; a statement so obvious and foundational to our understanding of the human condition it hardly seems worth making” (p. 287).

From infancy, supportive caregiving relationships foster regulation and form the foundations of attachment, which shape social-emotional development across the lifespan (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Sroufe, 2000). Consistent caregiving fosters a secure internal working model characterised by safety and confidence, whereas inconsistent relationships are linked to later emotional, mental health, and relational risks (Cyr et al., 2010). Research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) further highlights how relational instability can harm development (Garner & Yogman, 2021) and a parallel focus on positive childhood experiences (PCEs) suggests that safe, stable, and nurturing relationships can buffer against adversity and promote resilience (Bethell et al., 2019).

Across childhood and adolescence, even a single supportive adult has been associated with improved wellbeing and adaptive functioning in adversity (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). Late childhood and adolescence represent developmentally sensitive periods during which supportive relationships can reduce risk and support wellbeing and positive psychosocial functioning (Allen et al., 2007; Oberle et al., 2014, 2018; Taussig & Culhane, 2019). Even reflecting on feeling accepted and valued has been found to buffer against the adverse impact of setbacks and negative self-feelings in this age group (Brummelman et al., 2014). Finally, relationships continue to play a central role across the lifespan, with neuroscience suggesting that humans are wired for social connection (Siegel, 2010) and social isolation and loneliness identified as major risk factors for mortality, sometimes compared in magnitude to established health risks such as smoking (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). Therefore, developmental scientists place a strong emphasis on the promotion of supportive relationships, including natural and formal mentoring, as contexts for growth (Catalano et al., 2004). What these mentoring relationships look like, what forms they can have, and what benefits they bring will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

3.1.2 Historical background of youth mentoring

Mentoring is by no means a novel idea. The term is commonly traced to Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus entrusts his son Telemachus to the care of his friend named Mentor, and was popularised through François Fénelon's 1699 retelling of their educational journey (Roberts, 1999). More broadly, intergenerational guidance and support have long been viewed as a potential evolutionary advantage for human societies (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). Across the 18th and 19th centuries, mentoring increasingly appeared in educational discourse, before becoming formalised through early 20th century initiatives such as the Big Brothers Organisation (Irby & Boswell, 2016).

Mentoring entered mainstream public discourse toward the end of the 20th century. The 1980s saw rapid growth of youth mentoring programmes in the United States alongside rising concerns about inequality and the impact of poverty on young people (Baker & Maguire, 2005; Trachtenberg, 1982). At the same time, mentoring gained prominence within organisational and developmental psychology (Kram, 1983), reflecting broader interest in supportive developmental relationships. Federal investment soon followed, with substantial funding directed toward mentoring initiatives aimed at improving educational and social outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011). In Europe, mentoring programmes expanded during the 1990s, often linked to social integration agendas. Here mentoring was increasingly framed as mutually beneficial, fostering intercultural understanding and development for both mentors and mentees (Preston et al., 2019).

3.1.3 Definitions of youth mentoring

The academic literature offers a range of definitions of mentoring (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). While this reflects the significance of mentoring across education, psychology, and business contexts, it has also led to conceptual ambiguity, with overlapping uses of the term sometimes complicating research and comparison across studies (Dominguez & Kochan, 2020). As mentioned above, mentoring generally refers to a relationship in which a more experienced individual supports the growth of someone less experienced. It has been described as “a nurturing process” (Anderson & Shannon, 1988, p. 40) and commonly includes guidance, commitment, trust, role modelling, advice, and encouragement (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; Rhodes, 1994).

Within youth mentoring specifically, the relationship is typically defined as a caring bond between a young person and an older, non-parental figure who offers guidance and encouragement (Rhodes, 1994). DuBois and Karcher (2013) identify three defining elements of youth mentoring: (1) the mentor's greater experience, (2) their developmental guidance and support, and (3) an emotional bond grounded in trust and respect. Importantly, this conceptualisation leaves open the intended outcomes of mentoring, although many accounts emphasise the development of "competence and character" during the transition to adulthood (Rhodes, 1994, p. 188). Relatedly, some researchers draw on the concept of developmental relationships, defined as connections that help young people discover their identity, cultivate their abilities, and learn to engage with the world (Li & Julian, 2012; Roehlkepartain et al., 2017). These relationships are characterised by emotional connection, reciprocity, increasing complexity over time, and a gradual shift in power toward the young person (Bowers et al., 2015).

For the purposes of this research, youth mentoring is defined as a caring, reciprocal, developmental relationship between a young person and a non-parental adult who provides guidance, encouragement, and role modelling to promote the young person's positive development.

3.2 Models of youth mentoring

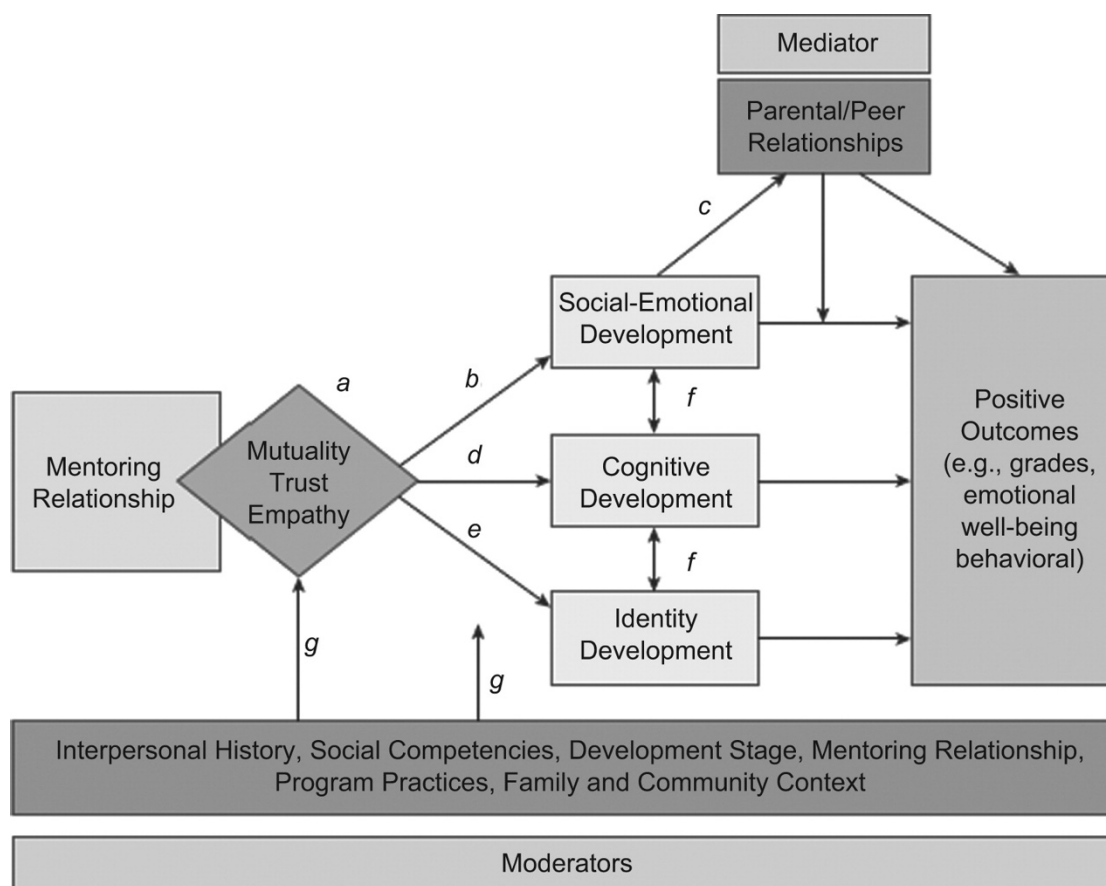
To examine how mentoring relationships may support children's development, the following section reviews the key models in the youth mentoring literature. It highlights the relational processes that have been proposed to affect growth and emphasises the need for targeted and structured mentoring, whilst cautioning that this should not be framed in deficit or problem-focused ways. Ultimately, it suggests that embedding Positive Youth Development (PYD) principles into youth mentoring models offers a particularly promising organising framework for future mentoring research and practice.

3.2.1 Developmental models of youth mentoring

The most influential framework for understanding mentoring processes is Rhodes' developmental model (Rhodes, 2002, 2005; Rhodes et al., 2006), which proposes that a strong mentor-mentee relationship promotes positive development through interconnected social-emotional, cognitive, and identity pathways (see Figure 6). Central to the model is the idea that developing a close emotional bond characterised by mutuality, trust, and empathy, will catalyse developmental change.

Figure 6

Developmental model of youth mentoring



Note. Reprinted from “How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A systematic assessment of the evidence,” by D. L. DuBois, N. Portillo, J. E. Rhodes, N. Silverthorn, and J. C. Valentine, 2011, Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 12(2), p. 61. Copyright 2002, the President and Fellows of Harvard College

First, such a close relationship is proposed to facilitate social-emotional development. Through shared activities, encouragement, and emotionally attuned interactions, mentors are seen as providing a consistent relational context that offers relief from daily stress while modelling prosocial skills, emotional regulation, and effective communication (Raposa et al., 2019b). Such experiences have sometimes been described as “corrective” relational encounters for young people with insecure attachment histories, revising internal working models and increasing trust in adults and help-seeking behaviours (Austin et al., 2020; Belsky & Cassidy, 1994; Luo & Stoeger, 2023). Second, mentoring may promote cognitive development. Drawing on social interaction and collaborative learning theories (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), mentors are seen as scaffolding learning through dialogue, guidance, and shared tasks (DuBois et al., 2002). Feelings of closeness with teachers or older mentors are thought to lead to improved cognitive functioning and information processing (Luo & Stoeger, 2023). Finally, mentoring is theorised to shape identity development. Mentors may serve as role models, expand young people’s aspirations, and support reflection on “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986), encouraging exploration of who they are and who they hope to become (DuBois et al., 2011; Herrera et al., 2013). Importantly, these processes are interdependent. For example, relational trust may enable role modelling to be effective, while cognitive growth can support emotional regulation (Raposa et al., 2019b).

The developmental model is in line with the historically dominant approach to youth mentoring embraced by most mentoring programmes, which emphasises the relationship, companionship, and emotional connection as the primary drivers of change (Christensen et al., 2020; Garringer et al., 2017; Jarjoura et al., 2018). Li and Julian (2012) famously compare this emotional bond to fluoride in toothpaste – the one active ingredient responsible for producing desired outcomes.

This model draws on extensive evidence on the importance of supportive relationships for human development. As noted earlier, humans are neurologically oriented toward connection (Siegel, 2010), and the absence of close relationships has been linked to significant health risks (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). Consistent with this, youth perceptions of closeness and support within mentoring relationships have been found to correlate with improved emotional, social, and behavioural outcomes, including greater self-worth, stronger self-regulation, and reduced depressive symptoms (Browne et al., 2022; Hagler et al., 2023). Strong mentoring relationships have also been shown to improve relationships with parents, teachers, and peers (Chan et al.,

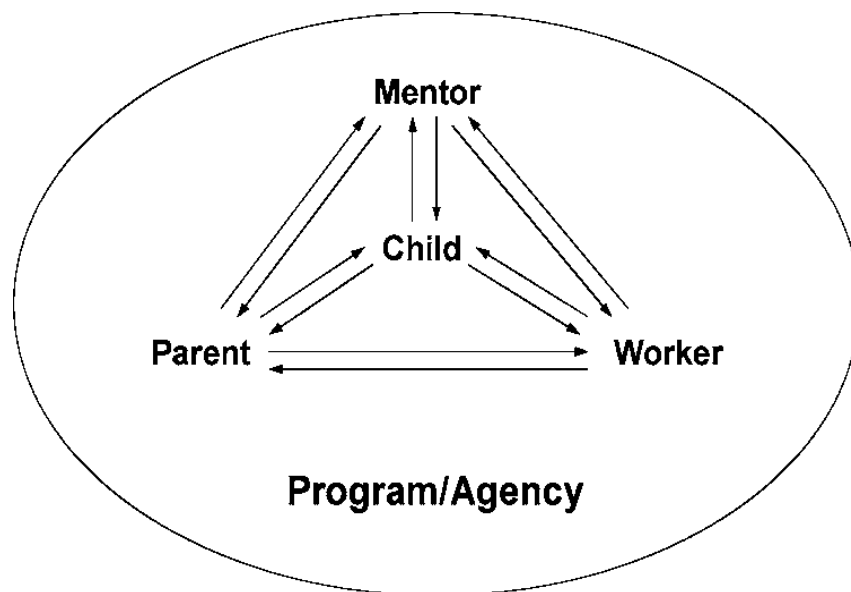
2013; DuBois et al., 2011). However, despite capturing the importance of relationship quality, the developmental model may not capture all the processes and mechanisms at play and has been criticised for its narrow focus on the dyadic bond and for underrepresenting contextual influences on mentoring processes and outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011).

Keller's (2005a) systemic model partly addresses this limitation by situating mentoring within a wider ecology. Drawing on family systems theory, it conceptualises the young person as embedded within interconnected relationships with mentors, caregivers, and programme staff (see Figure 7). Within this framework, mentoring outcomes emerge not only from the mentor-mentee relationship but also from the ways in which parents and staff shape, support, and mediate that relationship. Parents may influence mentoring directly through communication and indirectly through parenting practices or value alignment, while programme staff affect relationship quality through matching, training, supervision, and ongoing support. The model also highlights how mentors and staff can influence the parent-child relationship itself, both indirectly, through improvements in openness and help-seeking, and directly, through facilitating communication and supporting access to additional resources and services (Austin et al., 2020; DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019b). Finally, staff are often the child's first point of contact and become significant adults in young people's lives through monitoring, safeguarding, and relationship-building, thereby shaping multiple pathways within the mentoring system.

The main empirical support for this model comes from findings that stronger parental relationships and alignment with programme values are linked to higher-quality matches and lower dropout rates, and that programmes which actively engage caregivers tend to yield greater benefits for young people (DeWit et al., 2016, 2020; Shamblen et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 2021). These findings challenge purely dyadic interpretations of mentoring as a corrective relationship and instead suggest that mentoring effectiveness depends on coordinated relational systems. Still, while Keller's model expands the scope beyond the mentor-mentee bond, it does not fully capture all programme-level, individual, and contextual processes that shape youth outcomes. These include considerations of the activities and programme practices that define what mentors and mentees actually do. This is partly addressed by the bilateral framework of youth mentoring.

Figure 7

A systemic model of mentoring



Note. Reprinted from “A systemic model of the youth mentoring intervention,” by T. E. Keller, 2005, Journal of Primary Prevention, 26, p. 171.

3.2.2 The bilateral framework of youth mentoring

While supportive relationships are central to mentoring, emerging evidence suggests that relationships alone may be insufficient to produce measurable change (Austin et al., 2020; Christensen et al., 2020). In response to this, Cavell et al. (2021) propose a bilateral framework that conceptualises mentoring relationships both as inherently beneficial and as contexts for promoting targeted change. This builds on Cavell and Elledge (2014), who define mentoring as the practice of using relationships “as the context for prevention-focused activities and experiences” (p. 37), preserving the importance of relational bonds while emphasising structured, evidence-based practices. This aligns with calls to root mentoring in “prevention science”, which focuses on reducing risk through intentional, evidence-based strategies (Coie et al., 1993).

The bilateral framework distinguishes between mentoring as an end and as a means (see Table 1). The former focuses on building a safe, nurturing relationship, central to traditional mentoring models like Rhodes’ (2005), while the latter focuses on using mentoring

relationships as vehicles for achieving specific outcomes. There are two types of outcomes: problem-focused and transitional. Problem-focused mentoring targets specific issues such as aggression or particular groups such as at-risk youth. Transitional mentoring supports young people facing specific life transitions, such as coming out or ageing out of care systems.

Table 1

A functional typology of youth mentoring programmes according to the bilateral framework

	Mentoring Relationships as an End	Mentoring Relationships as a Means	
Type	Supportive	Problem-Focused	Transitional
Estimated length	Often one year or more	Less than a year	Dictated by the transition
Goals	Normative developmental achievements & milestones	Reductions in specific problems; improved health for specific groups	Successful transitions for specific groups
Putative change mechanisms	Safe, supportive, nurturing relationship	Shift in risk/protective factors specific to the problem or germane to the group	Shift in risk/protective factors specific to the group's transition

Note. Reprinted from “Back to the Future: Mentoring as Means and End in Promoting Child Mental Health,” by T. A. Cavell, R. Spencer, and S. D. McQuillin, 2021. Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 50(2), p. 289.

Consistent with the framework's emphasis on mentoring as a means of targeted change, empirical research increasingly supports targeted approaches over unstructured relational models (see also section 3.5.3). A large comparative meta-analysis found targeted, skill-based mentoring approaches to have an average effect size more than twice the size of non-specific relational mentoring approaches (Christensen et al., 2020). Similar patterns are observed in

psychotherapy, where structured interventions grounded in evidence-based protocols often outperform approaches relying solely on the therapeutic bond (e.g., Weisz et al., 2017), although relational factors such as warmth and empathy remain important even in structured treatments (Karver et al., 2018). Together, these findings suggest that supportive relationships may be necessary but not sufficient conditions for change.

However, the bilateral framework's targeted approach is strongly shaped by prevention-focused and problem-focused traditions, and it risks overlooking forms of mentoring that are structured and intentional yet oriented toward thriving rather than targeted at specific problems or transitions. By emphasising prevention and problem reduction, this perspective may inadvertently reinforce deficit perspectives, leaving less space for models that foreground growth, flourishing, and positive development.

3.2.3 Against a deficit perspective on youth mentoring

Much of the historical narrative of youth mentoring has been shaped by a deficit lens, portraying young people as problems to be managed or risks to be mitigated. This framing emerged during the early 20th century Progressive Era in the United States, when interventions targeted “at-risk” youth, especially those living in poverty (Lerner et al., 2014; Roth et al., 1998). Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), for example, was founded to support boys involved in the juvenile justice system by “rescuing” them from perceived deficits in their neighbourhoods (Beiswinger, 1985; Hagler et al., 2023). Its founder, Ernest Coulter, characterised poverty as “the story of three delinquents, the child, the parent and the community” (Coulter, 1913, p. xiii). This framing was reinforced by social control theory, which suggested that delinquency could be reduced through prosocial relationships (Hirschi, 1969), and by resilience research suggesting that adult relationships could offset adverse risk factors (Werner & Smith, 1992). Early impact evaluations which reported reductions in substance use and aggression among mentees (e.g., Tierney et al., 1995) further strengthened this problem-focused narrative. Elements of this perspective persist today. Outcomes such as reduced antisocial behaviour or delinquency remain central indicators of mentoring effectiveness (Cavell et al., 2021), and programmes frequently define their participants as “at risk.” Even the notion of mentoring as providing “corrective” relational experiences reflects an implicit deficit framing (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Rhodes, 2005).

While risk reduction is an important aim and problem-based models lead to targeted, evidence-based practices, the deficit narrative raises important concerns. First, defining young people through what they lack is disheartening and risks undermining their dignity and agency. As Lerner et al. (2014) ask, what message is conveyed when youth are described as inevitably destined for trouble without intervention? Such narratives may affect young people's self-concept and motivation, and some argue that deficit-based framings can verge on subtle forms of dehumanisation by reducing individuals to their problems and taking away the complexity of their full identity (Bain, Vaes, & Leyens, 2013; Dinishak, 2022). Second, deficit labels may facilitate self-fulfilling prophecies. Expectations of failure can shape young people's engagement and adults' responses, influencing educational trajectories and outcomes (Brophy, 1983; Jussim et al., 2009).

Third, locating the solution to problems within the individual mentee risks obscuring broader structural conditions. Framing mentoring as a means of “fixing” personal shortcomings echoes earlier character education models that suggested that children might not face problems if only they developed the “right” internal qualities while neglecting systemic barriers (Davis & Museus, 2019a) (see section 1.2.2 for a critique of this in the character education literature). Such perspectives may inadvertently shift responsibility for inequality onto young people themselves and divert attention from the institutional and social contexts shaping their lives (Davis & Museus, 2019b). These critiques highlight the need for mentoring frameworks to move beyond deficit assumptions which may inadvertently perpetuate social injustice.

3.2.4 Critical consideration of social justice issues in youth mentoring

It is important to recognise that deficit-based narratives in youth mentoring emerged in the context of deep social inequalities in the United States. Early programmes can be traced to the “Friendly Visitor” movement, in which middle-class volunteers sought to morally uplift low-income communities through “sweetness and order and light” (Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, 1887, p. 133). These paternalistic assumptions shaped the development of Big Brothers and later Big Sisters, founded on the belief that delinquent youth could be rescued by middle-class role models (McCord, 1978; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Many programmes have retained hierarchical dynamics in which mentors typically come

from more privileged groups while mentees are drawn from marginalised communities (Albright et al., 2017; Garringer et al., 2017; Hagler et al., 2023). There is a need for youth mentoring to address these dynamics and adopt principles of social justice.

One way of addressing these issues is by situating youth challenges within broader social and environmental contexts (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). From this perspective, emotional, behavioural, or academic struggles of mentored youth living in disadvantage cannot be separated from structural conditions like discrimination, marginalisation, housing instability, or unequal access to resources (Hagler et al., 2023; Hurd, 2024; Liang et al., 2013). Such social justice approaches challenge the common use of the term “at risk” in mentoring research and practice, arguing that the term can shift attention away from the social and economic conditions that shape young people’s lives. They argue that it is systems, rather than young people themselves, who may be “at risk” of failing to provide young people equitable opportunities (Brookes et al., 2025; Davis & Museus, 2019a).

When mentoring programmes overlook structural inequalities, they risk reinforcing the very problems they aim to address. Early deficit narratives, such as Coulter’s (1913) framing of the “three delinquents,” continue to echo in programmes that implicitly treat families or communities as risky backdrops to be corrected (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Taylor & Porcellini, 2014). Such framings not only raise ethical concerns but may also limit effectiveness by misidentifying the roots of youth challenges (Davis & Museus, 2019b), again mirroring critiques raised within the character education literature (see section 1.3.2).

A socially just approach does not negate the value of mentoring but reframes how it is practised. Liang et al. (2013) propose a social justice-oriented mentoring framework, which grounds mentoring relationships in shared power, youth voice, mutual learning, collaboration, and attention to systemic barriers. Brookes et al. (2025) similarly emphasise the importance of youth agency in mentoring. Programmes might further incorporate social justice principles by recruiting mentors from mentees’ communities, expanding culturally responsive formats such as group mentoring (Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021), providing mentor training and support in equity and cultural humility (Hagler et al., 2023), and engaging in advocacy around structural inequalities (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021).

Finally, moving beyond deficit perspectives and embracing principles of social justice aligns with Positive Youth Development (PYD). Grounded in an ecological understanding of development, this places the young person, their inner world, their motivation, skills, and agency, their context, and their needs, at the centre of youth programming (Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2006). It centres young people's strengths, dignity, agency, voice, and rights. It also emphasises the active role of their environment in shaping development and the need to increase supportive conditions, opportunities, and safe environments that promote adaptive developmental regulations and facilitate healthy development. Finally, it sees the relationship between an individual and their environment as dynamic and mutually influencing (Bowers et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2021; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Through respecting children's autonomy, seeing them as possessing strengths, and creating conditions that facilitate dialogue and encourage critical thinking, mentoring can empower children to critically question, actively engage with, and affect their environment and the conditions of their own thriving.

3.2.5 Positive Youth Development (PYD) models of youth mentoring

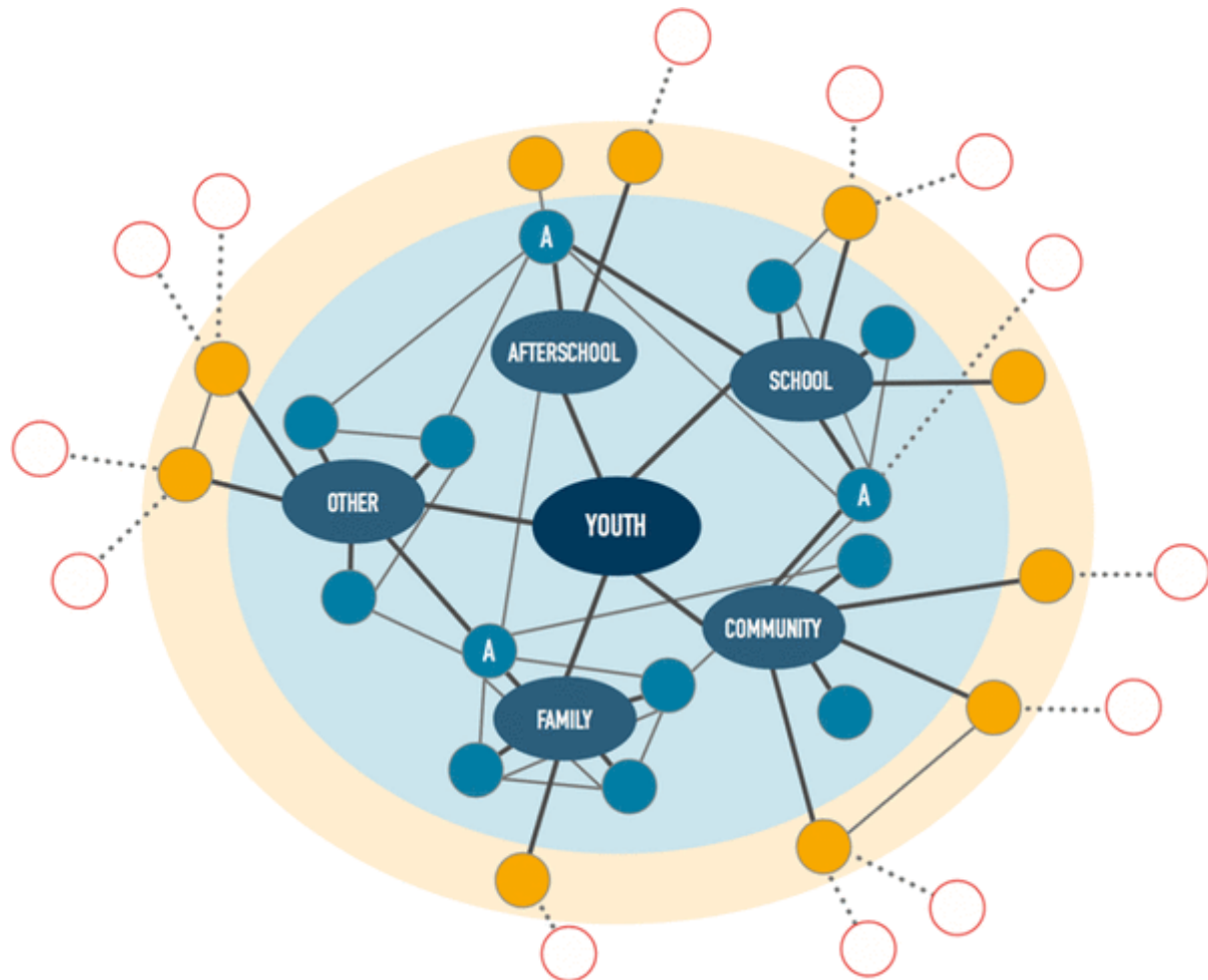
Many scholars have called for youth mentoring to move beyond deficit approaches and adopt a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021) (see Chapter 2). This is a strength-based, ecological framework grounded in Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) theory, which focuses on the dynamic interactions between young people and their surroundings and views supportive adult-child relationships as a central asset that can help youth thrive (Hurd, 2024; Liang et al., 2013; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). While no unifying PYD model of mentoring exists, various models and frameworks incorporate PYD principles and specify PYD processes.

One framework that aims to conceptualise the ecological aspect of PYD is Varga and Zaff's (2018) webs of support (see Figure 8), which maps an individual's relationships and the connections among them. The focal point of this framework is the young person, who is surrounded by developmental contexts (labelled ovals) and people (filled blue, filled orange, and unfilled red circles, ordered from the most core to the most peripheral connections). While youth benefit from multiple connections, their development is often closely tied to one or a small number of "anchors" (circles marked "A"), who are especially core or central adults who aid their growth (Spencer et al., 2011). The framework also positions young people as active

agents in their own web. This ecological, relational view, along with the focus on youth agency, offers one way of integrating PYD principles into youth mentoring.

Figure 8

Web of support



Note. Reprinted from “Webs of Support: An Integrative Framework of Relationships, Social Networks, and Social Support for Positive Youth Development,” by S. M. Varga and J. F. Zaff, 2018. Adolescent Research Review, 3, p. 6

Another framework that situates mentoring in a broader ecology is proposed by Schwartz and Rhodes (2016). Building on Rhodes’ developmental model and Keller’s systemic model outlined above, and in line with webs-of-support thinking, they integrate a PYD and RDS perspective and conceptualise mentoring not only as introducing new adults but also as strengthening existing developmental assets and relationships. As noted earlier, as a personalised intervention, mentoring may be especially well positioned to support internal and

external developmental assets of specific young people in specific contexts (Lerner et al., 2015). Still, while this expanded framing broadens the scope of mentoring, questions remain about how exactly formal programmes integrate these ecological principles in practice.

Other attempts to specify PYD processes within mentoring include Erdem et al.'s (2016) mediational model, which links mentoring support to improvements in the Five Cs, which in turn predict emotional and behavioural outcomes. Structural equation modelling by the researchers indicated that mentoring influenced outcomes indirectly through cultivating developmental assets (i.e., the Five Cs) rather than directly reducing problems. In contrast to deficit models that target youth risk, this reinforces the view that emotional and behavioural improvements may be mediated by the cultivation of developmental assets, including character. Building on this, the authors argue that mentoring programmes should intentionally target *confidence, competence, connection, character, and caring*.

Despite increasing alignment between mentoring and PYD, many programmes and studies continue to prioritise individual risk and dyadic relationship processes, overlooking the broader ecological context that shapes development (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Liang et al., 2013). Furthermore, questions remain around mechanisms. PYD frameworks specify *that* both ecological supports and developmental assets matter, but mentoring research still needs to clarify *how* these assets are built through concrete mentoring interactions and programme practices. This is a notable gap given mentoring's theoretical fit with RDS as a personalised, relational intervention, and presents a promising direction for future practice and research. It also provides part of the rationale for studying character-focused mentoring in which relational, targeted, and ecological elements are combined and can be explored through mentors' and children's accounts.

3.3 Formats of youth mentoring programmes

The models reviewed above clarify what mentoring is theorised to do and why it may support positive development. In practice, however, mentoring is delivered through a range of formats that differ in setting and structure. The following section situates the programme examined in this thesis within the main formats of youth mentoring. It begins with natural mentoring since this provides the backdrop against which formal programmes are often justified. It then reviews

the dominant formats in the evidence base (i.e., community-based and school-based mentoring), before considering online and near-peer mentoring. Finally, it introduces group-based and blended formats of mentoring, as these are central to the programme's design and to the PYD emphasis on development as embedded within wider relational contexts.

3.3.1 Natural mentoring

Youth mentoring can refer to both naturally occurring relationships that arise organically within a young person's social network and formal relationships facilitated by programmes. Natural mentoring relationships typically involve non-parental adults such as relatives, neighbours, coaches, teachers, godparents, elders, or religious leaders who become trusted confidants, advocates, and sources of social capital (Cavell et al., 2021; Deutsch et al., 2020). These relationships, present in varying forms across diverse cultural contexts, often enhance young people's sense of belonging and connectedness within their communities (Bowers et al., 2012; Van Dam et al., 2018) and have been linked to social-emotional, academic, and behavioural benefits (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Zimmerman et al., 2005).

Because they arise organically, natural mentoring relationships may feel more authentic, require fewer resources, and endure longer than formal mentoring (Deutsch et al., 2020). However, access to such support is uneven. A substantial proportion of young people appear to lack access to supportive non-parental adults: U.S. evidence suggests that around one-third of adolescents report never having had a mentoring relationship and around 10% report having no adult they can turn to for help (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021), while recent UK survey data indicate that 18% of teenagers have no trusted adult outside their family (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Recent U.S. survey evidence has further found that compared with a similar sample surveyed a decade earlier, today's 18-21-year-olds are less likely to report having had a natural mentor, indicating that the gap may be worsening (Garringer & Benning, 2023). Furthermore, while informal mentoring can be beneficial, the absence of intentional structure, training, or supervision may limit its effectiveness or even introduce risks if support is inconsistent or poorly guided (Spencer & Rhodes, 2014).

3.3.2 Formal mentoring

Formal mentoring programmes have developed partly in response to the uneven availability of natural mentors, offering structured relationships supported by programme policies, training, and supervision (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021). The past 30 years have seen a significant growth in interest in formal mentoring due to its potential to reach marginalised youth and its evidence of benefits for wellbeing, academic outcomes, self-regulation, and perceived support (DuBois et al., 2011; Hagler et al., 2023; Raposa et al., 2019b).

3.3.2.1 *Community-based and school-based mentoring*

Two widely studied formats of formal mentoring are community-based mentoring (CBM) and school-based mentoring (SBM). CBM typically involves screened adult volunteers meeting with young people in community settings over extended periods of time, combining recreational activities with goal-oriented discussions (DuBois & Keller, 2017; Jarjoura et al., 2018). One of the best-known CBM programmes is Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), which serves youth from low-income and single-parent households. Research has linked participation in CBM to positive social, emotional, and behavioural effects, alongside reductions in externalising behaviour (DuBois et al., 2011; Luo & Stoecker, 2023; Manoni-Millar et al., 2026).

SBM, one of the fastest growing mentoring models (Wheeler et al., 2010), embeds mentoring within the school day. This format reduces logistical demands on mentors, offers a structured setting for facilitating support, and allows for accessible training and supervision, often lowering programme costs (Herrera & Karcher, 2014). It also supports regular attendance and may reach higher numbers of vulnerable youth who may not otherwise enrol in CBM (Luo & Stoecker, 2023). The school context may further offer a familiar, safe environment for children and, in some cases, make initial engagement easier and soften power imbalances, particularly when children are at home in the school while mentors come from outside the school community.

However, being embedded into the school schedule may also introduce difficulties, including shorter and more fragmented contact time due to academic timetables (Wheeler et al., 2010) and the connotations of adult authority and school as a compulsory setting that may shape how

mentoring is received. In other words, the same setting that can increase accessibility may also come across as another adult-led activity. Despite these differences, meta-analytic evidence suggests that CBM and SBM produce broadly similar outcomes across social, emotional, behavioural, and academic domains (DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019b). While the programme examined in this research is school-based, it includes recreational activities and emphasises youth choice and voluntary participation, so that school embedding supports access without reducing youth autonomy.

3.3.2.2 Online and near-peer mentoring

Another format is online, or virtual, mentoring, which has expanded with technological advances and increases in remote interaction, including during and following the Covid-19 pandemic (Wright et al., 2024). Many formal mentoring programmes, including the one examined by the current research, moved online in this time. By connecting mentors and mentees across geographical boundaries, online mentoring may widen access to supportive adults, particularly for young people who lack local networks. However, online mentoring raises practical questions about engagement, privacy, safeguarding, and whether relational depth develops in the same way as in face-to-face mentoring, highlighting the need to consider format in relational processes.

Youth mentoring also varies in terms of who the mentors are. Both intergenerational mentoring, which connects young people with older adults, and peer mentoring, which pairs children with peers or with older adolescents, have been associated with benefits for both mentors and mentees (Keller et al., 2020). The format relevant for this thesis is near-peer mentoring, which involves pairing children with young adults. This is the case in the mentoring programme studied in the current research, in which the majority of mentors are university students, most of whom are 18-22 years old. Because the age gap is small, the mentors may be perceived as more relatable, which can increase openness and comfort for mentees (Karcher, 2014; Luo & Stoecker, 2023).

3.3.2.3 Group and blended mentoring

Group mentoring refers to formats in which one or more mentors interact with multiple young people over time, typically in structured, site-based settings. The defining feature is the

intentional cultivation of mentoring relationships within a group context, which distinguishes it from general youth group activities (Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021). Set-ups vary widely, ranging from one mentor working with two mentees to larger “mentoring communities” with dozens of mentees (Kroll, 2016; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014). Specific formats include *one-to-many mentoring* (one mentor with several mentees), *many-to-many* or *multi-mentor* approaches (multiple mentors and mentees without fixed matches), and *blended* formats that combine group work with one-to-one relationships (Huizing, 2012). This final format is the one examined by the current research.

Group mentoring offers several practical advantages over one-to-one mentoring. Sessions are often held in structured and supervised settings such as schools, which may increase accessibility and comfort for mentees (Karcher, 2014). They may also make it easier to deliver shared activities consistently across participants, because the group provides a predictable structure and shared reference point for discussion. They are typically cost-effective and have been found to attract volunteers who might be hesitant to commit to purely one-to-one formats (Deutsch et al., 2017). Although concerns have been raised about whether group formats can achieve the same relational depth as dyadic mentoring and about potential negative peer influence (Garringer, McQuillin, & McDaniel, 2017; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014), the evidence suggests that this is not the case and that well-facilitated groups can support identity formation, responsibility, positive peer norms, and mutually supportive peer relationships (Cawood & Wood, 2014; Dowd et al., 2015; Kupersmidt et al., 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2017; Van Ryzin, 2014). Finally, group mentoring may also align with the increasing orientation in late childhood and adolescence toward peer interactions, since young people participate alongside their peers (Eccles et al., 1993; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005).

All of the above suggests that group mentoring is not simply a cost-efficient alternative to dyadic models but a format that offers important additional benefits. Indeed, group mentoring has been associated with social-emotional growth, improved peer relationships, enhanced self-esteem, reduced depressive symptoms, and improved academic and behavioural outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011; Hirsch, 2005; Kuperminc, Chan, & Hale, 2018; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021). Although these outcomes have not been systematically compared against dyadic mentoring formats, meta-analyses indicate that both formats can support positive outcomes. Group mentoring may be especially promising, but it may also be especially sensitive to implementation conditions such as dosage, structure, and skilled facilitation (DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019b; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021).

3.4 Increasing the effectiveness of youth mentoring

3.4.1 Outcomes of youth mentoring

Formal youth mentoring has been found to support positive development across multiple domains. It has been associated with improvements in youth psychosocial functioning, including psychological wellbeing, coping skills, self-esteem, and self-regulation (Bowers et al., 2016; Cavell et al., 2021; DeWit et al., 2016; DuBois et al., 2011; Manoni-Millar et al., 2026; Raposa et al., 2019b). Mentoring has also been linked to enhanced perceptions of social support, self-efficacy, and social skills, as well as improved relationships with peers, teachers, and other adults (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Spencer et al., 2016). Some studies further report strengthened family functioning, communication, and bonding, suggesting that benefits may extend beyond the mentor-mentee relationship (Erdem et al., 2024; Raposa et al., 2019b).

Research has also documented behavioural improvements including reductions in substance use, bullying, school misconduct, aggression, and externalising behaviours such as juvenile reoffending (DuBois et al., 2011; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007; McQuillin & McDaniel, 2021). At the same time, mentoring has been linked to increases in prosocial behaviours such as cooperation, empathy, and self-control (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Sale et al., 2008).

Mentoring has also been associated with improvements in school-related outcomes, including attendance, school belonging, more positive attitudes toward learning, and enhanced perceptions of academic competence (Herrera et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019b). Some studies report gains in cognitive functioning, growth mindset, and standardised academic performance, although findings are mixed and vary across programme contexts (Erickson et al., 2009; Harper & Williams, 2014).

Despite these broadly positive findings, meta-analyses consistently find overall effects of youth mentoring to be relatively small (Christensen et al., 2020; Luo & Stoecker, 2023). Ziegler et al. (2021) have referred to this discrepancy between the promise of youth mentoring and the modest impact of mentoring programmes as the mentoring paradox.

3.4.2 The mentoring paradox: small overall positive effects

The mentoring field has demonstrated both the conceptual promise of youth mentoring as well as the potential for mentoring to yield positive effects. This has led to a surge in mentoring programmes and steady investment in mentoring-related research aimed at increasing the impact of mentoring (Christensen et al., 2020). Despite this, meta-analyses have shown remarkable consistency in reporting only modest overall effects. Reflecting on nearly three decades of research, Rhodes (2020) argues that mentoring programmes are “not nearly as effective as most people assume” (p. 5), with large-scale trials and cost-benefit analyses pointing to relatively weak average impacts.

Across major meta-analyses, effect sizes typically fall within a narrow range. DuBois et al. (2002, 2011) reported mean effects between $d = .18$ and $.21$, Tolan et al. (2014) found effects ranging from $.11$ to $.29$, Raposa et al. (2019b) reported a mean difference of $.21$, and Christensen et al. (2020) identified an average effect of $.19$. It is worth noting that while these values are conventionally classified as small (Cohen, 1988), they fall within the medium/moderate range according to guidelines from literature on universal youth programmes, which often translates into meaningful change (Tanner-Smith et al., 2018). Still, they are lower than those typically reported for specialised evidence-based interventions. Consistent with this pattern, a recent scoping review characterised impacts as small to moderate, although it did not calculate a pooled mean effect size and noted that most included studies lacked standardised effect estimates (Manoni-Millar et al., 2026). This consistency in low to medium average effect despite strong theoretical promise has been called the mentoring paradox (Luo & Stoeger, 2023; Ziegler et al., 2021).

The mentoring paradox may be linked to a variety of factors. First, the field encompasses considerable heterogeneity in definitions, formats, and models, making generalisation difficult (Ziegler et al., 2021). Meta-analyses also demonstrate variability across outcome domains. Tolan et al. (2014) reported smaller effects for academic achievement ($d = .11$) and larger effects for reductions in aggression ($d = .29$). Raposa et al. (2019b) further highlighted inconsistencies in how outcomes are categorised across studies, meaning that outcomes can be more similar across categories than within them. For example, some studies have grouped prosocial attitudes under the attitudinal/motivational domain rather than alongside

social/interpersonal outcomes. Such variability has led to calls for greater conceptual clarity and precision in defining mentoring aims (Arnold & Cater, 2011).

Second, modest effects may reflect uneven implementation of evidence-based practice. For example, Stelter et al. (2018) found that 31 out of 32 surveyed programmes did not fully meet established quality standards for monitoring and support, defined in the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* as ongoing match oversight and structured support for mentors and mentees, including regular check-ins and problem solving (Herrera, Garringer, & Bennett, 2025; MENTOR, 2009). More broadly, a recent scoping review found that mentoring frameworks and guidelines have had limited influence on contemporary research, suggesting that effective practice is not yet consistently informing the field (Lohmeyer et al., 2026). Furthermore, the prominence of broad, unspecified developmental goals (over 80% of programmes) over targeted approaches (only 10% of programmes) has prompted recommendations for more structured, targeted interventions (Christensen et al., 2020).

Third, small effects may stem from an overly narrow focus on the mentor-mentee dyad. Ecological and RDS perspectives emphasise that youth outcomes are shaped by wider relational and structural contexts, suggesting that programmes may be more effective when they engage families, communities, and systemic conditions alongside individual relationships (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Hagler et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2013; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Together, these explanations highlight the need to reconsider how mentoring is conceptualised, implemented, and evaluated in order to reconcile its theoretical promise with its observed impact. They also emphasise the need for the field to move beyond whether mentoring works towards greater clarity on which implementation conditions, mechanisms, and processes are necessary for change.

3.5 Characteristics of effective mentoring practice

Although youth mentoring shows potential to facilitate positive development, maximising impact requires attention to programme quality and implementation. This is particularly important in light of the rising popularity of mentoring as a youth intervention among researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders. Taken together, the mentoring literature points to four broad priorities for strengthening programme impact: (1) adhering to research-

based practice, (2) facilitating close mentoring relationships, (3) including targeted activities, and (4) looking beyond the mentor-mentee dyad, while also continuing to clarify the mechanisms and implementation conditions through which these elements translate into change.

3.5.1 Adhering to research-based mentoring practice

Reviews of the literature consistently show that programmes adhering to research-based practice achieve stronger outcomes (DuBois et al., 2002, 2011). Many of these practices are outlined in the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* (Herrera et al., 2025) and include systematic recruitment processes, screening, preparation and training, clear policies and expectations, ongoing match support, staffing and infrastructure, and evaluation. First among these are screening and training practices. Effective recruitment involves realistic portrayal of mentoring, clear eligibility criteria, background checks, and agreed minimum commitments (Herrera et al., 2025). Screening practices may also consider assessing cultural competence, empathy, maturity, and attitudes toward vulnerable youth (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Spencer, 2006b) and recruiting mentors from young people's own communities (Albright et al., 2017; Hagler et al., 2023). Some studies suggest that mentors with backgrounds in helping professions achieve stronger outcomes, potentially due to higher interpersonal skills and more realistic expectations (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Raposa et al., 2019b), although comprehensive training and ongoing support can compensate for limited prior experience (Hagler et al., 2023; Stelter et al., 2018; Weiler et al., 2019).

Other evidence-based practices relate to clear programme structures, including defined roles, expectations for contact, and access to staff support (Luo & Stoeger, 2023). Regular supervision and opportunities for mentor reflection have been linked to higher relationship quality and improved outcomes (Karcher et al., 2023; Keller & DuBois, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2013). Finally, effective mentoring integrates research into design and evaluation (DuBois et al., 2011; Keller et al., 2023) and prioritises monitoring and evaluation. This includes safeguarding oversight, structured feedback from mentees and other adults, and systematic tracking of programme fidelity by programme staff (Herrera et al., 2025; Kupersmidt et al., 2020).

3.5.2 Facilitating close mentoring relationships

Most conceptual models of youth mentoring emphasise the importance of a close, positive relationship, particularly within developmental approaches. As Rhodes (2002) notes, mentoring is unlikely to be effective without mutual trust, understanding, and emotional connection. Empirical research supports this premise, consistently identifying relationship quality, characterised by closeness, empathy, and perceived support, as one of the strongest predictors of positive mentoring outcomes (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021). Higher levels of trust and support are associated with improvements in wellbeing, self-esteem, coping, academic engagement, and behaviour (Raposa et al., 2019b).

Closeness does not emerge automatically; it develops over time and through intentional programme practices (DeWit et al., 2016). Longer matches and more frequent meetings are consistently associated with stronger bonds and greater benefits, particularly when relationships extend beyond initial “getting-to-know-you” phases into periods of growth and maintenance (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Keller, 2005b; Luo & Stoecker, 2023). Still, research suggests that the opportunity for meaningful engagement may matter more than sheer duration, as shorter but well-structured programmes can also be effective (Cavell & Elledge, 2014; Hagler et al., 2023). Importantly, abrupt, premature, or poorly managed endings can undermine young people’s wellbeing, producing feelings of confusion, rejection, sadness, anger, or grief, whereas planned endings or supported rematching mitigate these risks (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Hagler et al., 2023; Keller et al., 2025; Spencer, 2007).

Programmes can foster closeness by creating conditions that support stability and relational growth. Clear expectations, consistent supervision, parental engagement, as well as structured meeting routines, which are especially common in group and school-based mentoring, reduce the likelihood of early termination and strengthen relationship quality (Hagler et al., 2023; Stelter et al., 2021). While demographic matching has sometimes been proposed as a means of enhancing connection, evidence suggests that shared interests rather than shared identity are more reliable predictors of relationship strength (DuBois et al., 2011; Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Raposa et al., 2019a).

Close mentoring relationships can also be facilitated through specific relational processes. Goldner and Ben-Eliyahu (2021) identify three key components of high-quality relationships: emotional, recreational, and promoting-catalysing. The emotional component involves reliability, empathy, authenticity, respect, sensitivity, attunement, and attentive listening, all of which have been linked to stronger mentoring relationships and positive youth outcomes (Donlan et al., 2017; Larsson et al., 2016; Pryce, Gilkerson, & Barry, 2018; Weiler et al., 2014). The recreational component includes shared activities and reciprocal communication. Research suggests that mentors who combine play, enjoyable activities, and meaningful conversation foster stronger bonds (Austin et al., 2020) and that recreational engagement can reinforce mentee perceptions of mentor support (Larose et al., 2015). Finally, promoting-catalysing practices such as advocacy and targeted activities encourage autonomy, empowerment, and skill development. These include activities that improve self-esteem, critical thinking, anger management, or other thriving-oriented activities such as goal setting, strengths exploration, or growth mindset tasks (Donlan et al., 2017; DuBois et al., 2011; DuBois & Keller, 2017). Overall, effective mentors appear to move across these components, balancing support, companionship, and guidance (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Luo & Stoeger, 2023).

3.5.3 Including targeted mentoring processes

As suggested above, effective mentoring appears to depend not only on relationship quality, but also on the incorporation of targeted processes and activities. Emerging evidence suggests that programmes combining relational support with intentional, goal-oriented skill-building achieve stronger outcomes than purely friendship-based models (Luo & Stoeger, 2023; Lyons et al., 2019) (see section 3.2.2). For example, a meta-analysis found average effect sizes of 0.11 for non-specific programmes compared with 0.25 for targeted mentoring (Christensen et al., 2020).

One reason for this may be that including targeted processes clarifies mechanisms of change. Structured skill-building activities allow programmes to specify goals, whereas unstructured mentoring often leaves both activities and outcomes diffuse. Without clear goals or structure, mentors may feel overwhelmed and struggle to engage their mentee (Jarjoura et al., 2018; Spencer, 2007). This may be particularly the case when working with children referred to mentoring because of social or emotional challenges. While this raises questions about whether

such young people would be better served by professional services (Browne et al., 2022), the vast majority of children who need support do not receive treatment and there is a need for prevention-focused, skills-based approaches that can provide accessible support for youth who fall below clinical thresholds (Sourk et al., 2019). Programmes combining mentoring with structured activities, specialised training, and professional supervision show promising outcomes, especially for youth with complex needs (Schwartz et al., 2013; Taussig & Culhane, 2019).

Importantly, structured activities need not be problem-focused but can also integrate strength-based frameworks such as character education and Positive Youth Development (PYD). The programme studied in this thesis reflects this approach by integrating a structured wellbeing and character curriculum within its mentoring model. Karcher (2014), who refers to mentoring with a structured curriculum as a “promising practice”, explicitly argues that a mentoring curriculum must not intend to fix kids or solve problems but should seek to promote positive youth development. This may involve promoting universal strengths through evidence-based methods (Kozina, 2021; Zins & Elias, 2007) as well as supporting individual strengths within specific developmental contexts (Liang et al., 2013). Such integration would allow mentoring to bring together character education, social-emotional learning (SEL), PYD, and positive psychology within a broader interdisciplinary approach to youth development (Elias et al., 2014; Ng & Vella-Brodrick, 2019).

Early examples of programmes that combine mentoring with PYD and SEL suggest promising outcomes. For example, a PYD-focused mentoring programme which embedded a structured roadmap of thriving activities reported higher levels of perceived support from adults, which led to increases in the Five Cs as well as contribution, growth mindset, and goal setting (DuBois & Keller, 2017). Similarly, the SPARK mentoring programme, which combines an SEL curriculum with group and one-to-one mentoring, reported improvements in communication, decision-making, emotional regulation, and resilience (Green et al., 2021). These results are consistent with the model by Erdem et al. (2016) as well as the PYD hypothesis that relational support from caring mentors will help young people thrive through the cultivation of developmental assets (Lerner et al., 2014; Scales et al., 2011).

Importantly, the literature suggests that the most effective mentoring balances relational depth with purposeful activity. Overly prescriptive approaches risk undermining the relational foundation of mentoring, which remains central to engagement and developmental change (Christensen et al., 2020). However, the strongest outcomes may arise when close mentoring relationships are combined with intentional practices that actively promote development, such as goal setting, feedback, and structured skill-building (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Luo & Stoecker, 2023). Using data from 1,360 mentor-mentee dyads in the United States, Lyons et al. (2019) found that while relationship quality alone predicted small to moderate effects and targeted activities (defined as goal setting and feedback) alone predicted moderate to large effects, the greatest benefits occurred when both were present simultaneously. The authors describe this integration as a “sweet spot” between relational depth and structured developmental practice, highlighting the importance of designing mentoring models that intentionally integrate both dimensions. However, as Lyons et al. themselves note, this finding also points to the need to examine how such intentional practices interact with relationship quality and how they are translated into meaningful change rather than mechanical task completion. Understanding these processes may be key to maximising the impact of mentoring programmes.

3.5.4 Looking beyond the mentor-mentee dyad

Finally, effective mentoring practice may be tied to extending the focus beyond the mentor-mentee dyad. This aligns with RDS and ecological models of mentoring, including Keller’s (2005a) systemic model, Varga and Zaff’s (2018) webs of support framework, and Schwartz and Rhodes’ (2016) ecological approach, all of which conceptualise mentoring as embedded within wider relational networks which both affect and are affected by the mentoring relationship.

The most common strategy for an extended focus is parent involvement (Herrera et al., 2025). As mentioned above, programmes which involve parents have been found to achieve greater positive outcomes, including stronger match stability and relationship quality, than those that do not (Erdem et al., 2024; Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Herrera et al., 2025) and parent satisfaction with and support for mentoring relationships has consistently been linked to stronger outcomes (DeWit et al., 2016; Hagler et al., 2023). Beyond involving parents, effective

mentoring may also involve young people's broader social networks. As discussed above, one strategy that has shown promise is group mentoring (Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021). More broadly, a recent meta-analysis found that interventions activating young people's wider social networks had sizeable effects across academic, psychological, family, and social outcomes, especially when young people themselves helped decide who to involve (Koper et al., 2025).

Most mentoring models assume that mentoring will strengthen young people's connections beyond the mentor-mentee dyad. Developmental and bilateral models propose that mentoring improves internal working models, receptivity to support, and help-seeking behaviours, thereby strengthening relationships with parents, teachers, and peers (Cavell et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2005). Building on this, Erdem et al. (2016) theorise that mentoring is an ecological asset which supports mentee connection and perceived support. These are thought to generalise into other contexts such as home and school rather than remaining confined to the dyad. However, empirical evidence suggests that such spill-over effects may depend on mentors actively engaging in connecting behaviours, such as intentionally linking mentees to people and organisations beyond the dyad (e.g., extracurricular opportunities, other supportive adults), and engaging with adults in the mentee's life. Austin et al. (2020) found that mentoring characterised by both relationship closeness and intentional connection-building with other adults and community opportunities beyond the dyad was associated with improved family relationships, increased help-seeking, and greater engagement in extracurricular activities.

These findings support earlier research highlighting the role of advocacy and coordination with other adults in enhancing mentoring outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011). They also provide empirical backing for both Schwartz and Rhodes' (2016) framework, which includes an explicit focus on strengthening youth's existing connections, and the webs of support framework, which suggests that a close adult relationship can serve as an anchor point for building and drawing on a broader web of support (Varga & Zaff, 2018). This is particularly important given that mentoring relationships are time-limited, and their effects may diminish after programme closure (Austin et al., 2020; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

Extending this ecological perspective further, some scholars situate mentoring within broader youth-adult partnership models that emphasise shared power, youth agency, social justice, and collective action (Brookes et al., 2025; Liang et al., 2013; Zeldin et al., 2005). Through mutual

decision-making and collaborative engagement, mentoring can foster critical consciousness and prepare young people for community participation (Hurd, 2024; Liang et al., 2013; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). These approaches position mentoring not only as an individual-level intervention, but as a relational practice embedded within, and potentially transformative of, young people's wider social contexts. At the same time, these expanded framings underline that more evidence is needed on how specific mentoring interactions and programme practices activate these pathways in practice, and for whom and under what conditions they are most likely to do so.

Chapter 4 The current research

The previous three chapters have set the stage for the current research from three complementary angles. Chapter 1 positioned this thesis within an expansive and interdisciplinary approach to character education, highlighting the limitations of narrow deficit or achievement-oriented narratives and the need to draw more systematically on developmental science while retaining a broad, holistic, non-instrumental, flourishing-oriented framework. Chapter 2 framed the research within Positive Youth Development (PYD), foregrounding ecological context, personalised support, supervised strength-building activities, active youth participation, and youth-adult relationships. Chapter 3 suggested that youth mentoring may offer a promising context for supporting character growth and PYD. It also showed that mentoring programmes may need to incorporate structured, targeted activities and PYD principles to strengthen outcomes, and that further research is needed to clarify the mechanisms and implementation conditions through which mentoring is most effective. Together, these chapters provide the conceptual and empirical foundation for the current research, which examines a character-focused mentoring programme through a PYD lens. The theoretical integration developed here is also represented visually in the opening synthesis of Chapter 8, where it is combined with the empirical findings in an integrated PYD model of character-focused youth mentoring (Figure 17).

4.1 The gap

Despite growing interest in character education, Positive Youth Development (PYD), and youth mentoring, and increasing calls for mentoring to adopt a PYD lens, evidence remains limited on how exactly mentoring supports PYD and character growth and on which relational and programme mechanisms are most critical for fostering positive social, emotional, and character outcomes. The current research addresses this gap by exploring how children and mentors experience a PYD-informed mentoring programme that integrates a research-based character education curriculum.

In doing so, it engages with calls to connect character education to more empirically grounded psychological fields, to attend to the skills required to enact character, and to integrate evidence-based practice and implementation guidance. It also responds to the need for mentoring research to move beyond deficit-oriented or purely relational models by examining how mentoring can

integrate targeted activities drawn from character, SEL, and PYD research. Finally, it follows PYD in its practical orientation by exploring how a character-focused programme operates in real settings, what young people and mentors perceive as meaningful within it, and how similar programmes may support positive development in late childhood, including attention to the processes through which change is understood to occur. This research is conducted in a researcher-practitioner capacity, reflecting my role within the organisation delivering the programme.

4.2 Definitions and approaches to character and wellbeing

Situated within the PYD framework, this research explores character growth among children aged 9-11, a period characterised by substantial emotional, social, and cognitive change, increasingly differentiated self-understanding, the development of attitudes and values, and heightened social sensitivity (Best & Miller, 2010; Daniel et al., 2024; Foulkes et al., 2018; Markus & Nurius, 1984; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2013) (see section 2.2.3). Given the breadth of definitions of character in the literature (see Chapter 1), it is important for me to clarify what I mean by character in this research. For the purposes of this thesis, I loosely define character as a broad set of strengths and capacities that shape how young people understand themselves, relate to others, and exercise judgement and agency across contexts. Three distinctive features further define my approach: (1) an expansive view of character, (2) a non-instrumental, flourishing narrative of development, and (3) an ecological systems perspective.

First, I take an expansive view of character which includes non-cognitive, social, and emotional qualities alongside moral ones, aligning with PYD's concept of internal developmental assets. This contrasts with narrower models of character focused primarily on moral values (Kristjánsson, 2002), which I view as insufficient for capturing other aspects of holistic development. It also differs from achievement-oriented framings (e.g., grit, academic tenacity) and from some skills-focused versions of SEL, which foreground psychosocial competency development without always making their ethical or flourishing-oriented aims explicit. My definition is closest to positive psychology's virtue-informed view and aligns with empirical work that combines SEL and character development (Hatchimonji et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2025) and with inclusive framings of character education as any youth programming that promotes social, emotional, moral, and broader positive development, even when it does not use the term "character" (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

Second, I adopt a non-instrumental view of character development (Senechal, 2010), in contrast to dominant achievement, economic, or outcome-driven framings. Following Aristotelian and positive psychology traditions, I understand character strengths not as tools for academic attainment or later workplace success, but as constitutive of a flourishing life (*eudaimonia*). This reflects a “being” rather than just a “doing” orientation (Shek et al., 2019). Beyond only outward behaviour or achievement (“what you do”), I am concerned with a young person’s inner world, their identity, motivations, and purpose (“who they are”). Although difficult to measure, this internal dimension is central to my conceptualisation and fits PYD’s view of development as movement toward an internal state of thriving that is valuable in itself, even as it may foster broader developmental outcomes and behaviours (Benson et al., 2011; Benson & Scales, 2009).

Third, drawing on Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) theory (see section 2.2), my conceptualisation of character adopts an ecological systems perspective. Character growth is not viewed as an isolated individual process but as emerging through dynamic interactions between young people and their environments. In this view, healthy development is promoted by increasing *adaptive developmental regulations*, defined as mutually beneficial alignments between internal assets (e.g., personal qualities, skills, and competencies) and external supports (e.g., relationships, opportunities). This perspective is also compatible with a social justice lens, foregrounding both personal agency and structural context (Lerner et al., 2021).

There are three further notes I would like to make, related to the above. First, I reject both moral-deficit and social-mobility narratives of character education. Although the programme operates in disadvantaged communities, neither the programme nor this research assumes that character is the “missing link” in overcoming poverty (see section 1.2.2). RDS theory challenges such narratives by situating inequality within larger social systems, rejecting notions that place the burden on overcoming difficulty on the individual (Ris, 2015). From this perspective, the focus should involve identifying and building on existing strengths within young people and communities, treating young people as active participants, remaining sensitive to the effects of systemic barriers, and enhancing developmental regulations by increasing access to supportive assets (e.g., youth programmes, supportive adults, safe spaces) while also calling for systemic change (see Chapter 2).

Second, I adopt an applied, programme-facing account of character. While I acknowledge the importance of a strong theoretical background, my focus is not on the philosophical underpinnings of character. As discussed in Chapter 2, my primary concern is how character growth can be supported in practice. This is in line with PYD's orientation toward youth programming (see section 2.2.2). This applied focus also forms the backdrop for the expansive definition of character I adopt, aligning with evidence suggesting that broad character education programmes outperform narrow moral-focused ones, likely because character development depends on a wider range of psychosocial competencies (Elias et al., 2014; Hatchimonji et al., 2022; Zakrzewski, 2021) (see section 1.1.4).

Finally, a note on language. I use the terms character *strengths* rather than *virtues* or *traits*. This reflects the breadth of qualities included (i.e., beyond only moral qualities) and the context of youth programmes since this language is more familiar to children. It also more readily suggests malleable characteristics rather than fixed personality traits and aligns with positive, strength-based narratives of developmental assets in PYD. In line with Aristotelian and positive psychology traditions, I view these strengths as both aspects of, and pathways towards, wellbeing (Casali & Feraco, 2025). Again, in line with PYD and much of the psychology literature, I use the term *wellbeing* rather than *eudaimonia*, but mean by this not a state of cheerfulness, but a more objective state grounded in good character, purpose, meaning, and long-term flourishing (see section 1.2.5).

4.3 The WISE Mentoring programme

This research examines a character-focused school-based mentoring programme delivered in primary schools in Glasgow for children aged 9-11. The programme uses a blended model combining a stable one-to-one mentoring relationship with group discussion and activities, alongside a structured Wellbeing and Character curriculum. It consists of weekly sessions during term time from October to June, consistent with PYD recommendations that youth programmes run for at least nine months (Catalano et al., 2004). It is designed to provide continuity and stability during late primary school, a sensitive period preceding the transition to secondary education.

Each project includes a stable group of six to eight mentor-mentee pairs supported by a project leader. Although the one-to-one relationship forms the core of the programme, pairs meet within a shared group setting rather than in isolation. A typical one-hour session begins with a group check-in, discussion, or introduction to the curriculum topic led by the project leader. Mentors and children then spend one-to-one time talking and completing selected evidence-informed curriculum activities from their Wisebooks that integrate psychosocial and moral development, usually followed by informal or recreational time and a closing group reflection, activity, or game. This structure allows children to develop an individual relationship while also participating in a wider group of peers and supportive adults.

The project leader remains present throughout the session and is responsible for its overall structure and safe delivery. This includes coordinating sessions, introducing curriculum topics, guiding the pace of delivery, leading group activities, supporting mentors, and monitoring children's engagement and wellbeing. They also oversee mentor-mentee matching, taking account of children's preferences and perceived relational fit, as the same mentor-mentee match is usually maintained throughout the programme. Finally, the project leader manages safeguarding, liaises with schools and families, and runs supervision debrief sessions to help mentors respond to difficulties or adapt future sessions where necessary (Catalano et al., 2004; Kupersmidt et al., 2020; Luo & Stoeger, 2023).

Before the programme begins, school staff are asked to identify children they believe might benefit most from the consistent support of a mentor. Children may be referred for different developmental, relational, or contextual reasons; they do not need to meet a particular diagnostic, behavioural, or statutory threshold. Self-nomination is also possible. Referral does not itself determine participation; the programme is voluntary, meaning that parents must provide consent and children must also choose to take part. Mentoring is embedded within the school timetable to support consistency (Luo & Stoeger, 2023), while remaining distinct from formal teaching or therapeutic provision.

Mentors are mostly university students recruited through student channels, volunteering hubs, and student societies. Many are Psychology students with an interest in working with young people, and the predominance of student volunteers gives the programme a largely near-peer format. Prospective mentors complete the organisation's recruitment and safeguarding procedures, including an application, interview, references, and Protecting Vulnerable Groups checks, and are asked to commit to the programme for the academic year.

Before mentoring begins, volunteers receive training addressing the mentor's role, safeguarding and professional boundaries, relationship-building and communication, and the Wellbeing and Character curriculum, including an overview of the seven topics and structured activities. Training also introduces approaches to supporting emotional regulation and resilience and to trauma-informed and neurodiversity-responsive practice. Beyond this, mentors receive continuing support through session briefings, post-session supervision, and informal consultation from the project leader.

Following each session, mentors complete brief records of the activities and discussions undertaken, children's engagement and understanding, the developing mentoring relationship, and any challenges or safeguarding concerns. These records inform ongoing reflection, supervision, and adaptation of support. Programme staff work closely with school staff, including class teachers and pastoral leads, to share relevant information, coordinate support around children's needs, and situate mentoring within a wider school-based support system. Parents receive progress updates and are invited to selected activities, such as the end-of-year graduation, reflecting evidence that involving multiple developmental contexts can strengthen youth programme impact (Lyons et al., 2019; Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the programme retained its curriculum and relational aims, but delivery varied between online, in-person, hybrid, and socially distanced formats. Group sizes and opportunities for interaction sometimes varied due to social distancing and pairs working in online breakout rooms. This variation is particularly relevant to Study 1 and is examined in Chapter 5.

The programme was delivered by Citywise Mentoring until August 2023 and by WISE Mentoring thereafter; WISE was established following Citywise's closure. As a result, the programme is referred to as "Citywise" in data collected before August 2023 and as "WISE" in data collected thereafter. Although the organisational structure changed and aspects of delivery continued to develop, the core programme design, session structure, curriculum, and approaches to mentor recruitment, training, supervision, and monitoring were carried forward across the transition.

4.3.1 PYD-oriented design features

Grounded in PYD and RDS theory, the WISE mentoring programme operationalises PYD through three design commitments: personalised support through adult-child relationships, supervised skill-building activities, and ecological embedding. First, one-to-one mentoring provides a practical mechanism for tailoring support to each child's strengths (Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner et al., 2015). This implements PYD's focus on the unique individual, their specific experiences, their individual meaning making, as well as their active role in development and sustained relationships with adults (Blum, 2003; Larson, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015).

Second, the programme combines relationship development with focused skill-building, reflecting evidence that targeting the development of internal assets, including resilience, self-efficacy, and social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and moral competence, strengthens outcomes in mentoring and PYD contexts (Benson et al., 2011; Catalano et al., 2004; Christensen et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 2019; Yuan et al., 2025).

Third, the programme acknowledges the dynamic interplay between individuals and their context. From this perspective, mentoring relationships may serve as ecological assets supporting adaptive development (Erdem et al., 2016; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016) (see sections 3.2.5 and 3.5.4). The programme is also embedded ecologically through school-based delivery and close partnership with school staff, family/community engagement (which increased during the Covid-19 pandemic when children joined from home), and a blended model that combines one-to-one mentoring with group activities, supporting peer connection and belonging (Catalano et al., 2004; Keller, 2005a; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021; Luo & Stoeger, 2023). Beyond being situated in children's relational environments, the programme also seeks to acknowledge the broader social, cultural, and economic context and incorporate social justice perspectives. This shapes both curriculum content and mentor practices, including attention to power-sharing and youth voice (Lerner et al., 2021; Liang et al., 2013).

4.3.2 The seven steps of the WISE Wellbeing and Character Curriculum

The programme follows a seven-step “Wellbeing and Character” curriculum focused on:

- (1) self-knowledge,
- (2) growth mindset,
- (3) goal setting,
- (4) resilience,
- (5) self-control,
- (6) good judgement, and
- (7) fairness.

The first three topics are intended to provide the tools, motivation, and starting point for growth, helping children reflect on who they are, believe in their potential, and learn practical steps for change. They are designed to pave the way for the latter four strengths, which are loosely based on the cardinal virtues: courage/fortitude, temperance, wisdom, and justice. These are central to classical philosophy, appearing as core educational goals in Plato’s *Republic* and as major virtues in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (Roberts, 2017). They are also associated with aspects of flourishing, with recent psychological and social-emotional research supporting them as key contributors to wellbeing (see below for an overview and supporting evidence).

The order of topics is intentional, progressing from the individual (“me”) to the community (“we”), and ending with the interpersonal, moral strength of fairness. In line with an Aristotelian view that considers the most important strengths to be those beneficial to others (Kristjánsson, 2013), the early steps are designed to support the later ones by building self-understanding and the attitudes and skills needed to follow through on intentions, act ethically, and engage in meaningful character growth (Elias et al., 2014; Mikulincer et al., 2005; Vasil & Tomasello, 2022).

The curriculum is delivered through two printed activity books, referred to in the programme as the “Wisebooks” (see Appendix A for a preview). These feature Yeti and Marsh, two illustrated characters who guide children and mentors through each topic. Yeti represents the “not yet” mindset of growth, while Marsh, a marshmallow, models resilience by “bouncing back” when dropped or squashed.

4.3.2.1 Self-knowledge

The first topic introduces children to character strengths and helps them identify their own strengths. Children consider how they demonstrate these across contexts (home, school, friendships) and which ones they think they need to develop further. This draws on evidence that strength awareness is associated with wellbeing (Chérif et al., 2021; Green, 2022; Proyer et al., 2015; Seligman et al., 2005) and aligns with SEL models that treat self-awareness as foundational for self-management (e.g., CASEL, 2013). It is also consistent with humanistic psychology's emphasis on self-understanding (Wong, 2006) and with the VIA Classification of Strengths, which positions self-reflection as a basis for flourishing (Niemiec, 2012; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

4.3.2.2 Growth mindset

Building on self-knowledge, the second topic introduces growth mindset, which encourages children to see their abilities and character as malleable (Dweck, 2000). Children reflect on how much they have grown since they were born, practise reframing mistakes as learning opportunities, and explore language that shifts fixed beliefs into growth-oriented alternatives (e.g., moving from “I’ll never get better” to “I need help understanding this” or “this will take time”), drawing on research on effective growth mindset strategies (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017; Sun, 2015). They also envision their future selves, a strategy linked to increased motivation, a sense of control, and wellbeing (Layous et al., 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011).

Although growth mindset research has largely focused on academic outcomes, with varied results and meta-analyses suggesting small overall effects (Burnette et al., 2023; Macnamara & Burgoyne, 2023), evidence indicates that mindset may operate more reliably via psychological pathways, boosting motivation, engagement, and perceived control, with some findings showing stronger links to these non-academic outcomes than to academic achievement itself (Jiang et al., 2024; Karlen et al., 2019), making it potentially relevant to psychosocial and character development. The inclusion of growth mindset also follows Character Lab (2026), which includes it in its “strengths of will,” and is consistent with models of 21st-century and non-cognitive skills (Farrington et al., 2012).

4.3.2.3 Goal setting

The third topic builds on the above by teaching children to set SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Action-based, Realistic, and Time-based) related to their personal growth (Doran, 1981; Locke & Latham, 2002). This is supplemented by activities that guide children to imagine what achieving their goal would change and how it would feel, anticipate internal obstacles and their emotional impact, and plan concrete responses if these arise. These follow the MCII approach, which combines mental contrasting (MC) (i.e., visualising outcomes and obstacles) with implementation intentions (II) (i.e., if-then plans for overcoming obstacles) (Duckworth et al., 2013; Gollwitzer, 1999; Oettingen, 2012). An emphasis on goal-directed self-improvement again aligns with multiple youth development frameworks, including models of soft skills, social and emotional skills, character, and resilience (CASEL, 2013; Character Lab, 2026; Farrington et al., 2012; Lippman et al., 2015; Paterson et al., 2014).

4.3.2.4 Resilience

Resilience sessions introduce the idea of “bouncing back” from difficulty and normalise setbacks through the concept of the “drop” (i.e., moments of being knocked down), drawing on materials from ClassDojo and PERTS (2026). Children read stories of people who have overcome adversity and hear mentors share challenges. They learn that it’s okay to feel sad when they fall down and are guided to respond with courage. Activities help children notice connections between emotions, thoughts, and actions, recognise the stress cycle, and practise positive coping strategies (e.g., seeking support). While activities draw on positive psychology, self-compassion, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and SEL (Neenan, 2017; Seligman et al., 2005), the framing is broadly compatible with an Aristotelian account of resilience as courage or “the ability to suffer hardship yet thrive in the process” (Franklin, 2010, p. 79).

Although resilience features widely across developmental frameworks, including performance-virtue framings (JCCV, 2024), 21st century skills (Fadel, 2015), and positive psychology (Seligman et al., 2009), it is sometimes framed within deficit or mobility narratives (e.g., Paterson et al., 2014, see section 1.2.2). This programme treats resilience as a developmental capacity grounded in positive psychology and virtue ethics, rather than as an individualised solution for structural adversity.

4.3.2.5 *Self-control*

In self-control sessions, children learn to manage emotions and impulses by completing activities that contrast impulsive (“fast brain”) and thoughtful (“slow brain”) behaviour, and by identifying bodily cues, triggers, and strategies for regulation. These activities draw on research in psychology and SEL (e.g., Bierman et al., 2010; Cole et al., 2010; Daunic et al., 2012; Riggs et al., 2006).

Self-control has deep roots in the character and virtue literature. Socrates equated virtue with self-control (Carr, 2012), while Aristotle treated it as a transitional virtue, important for resisting temptation but ultimately unnecessary for the truly virtuous (Kristjánsson, 2013). It is a “strength of will” in the Character Lab (2026) framework and connects closely to goal pursuit (i.e., doing what’s best despite short-term desires). It also appears as temperance in positive psychology and features prominently across non-cognitive, soft-skill, and SEL models (CASEL, 2013; Farrington et al., 2012; García, 2016; Lippman et al., 2015; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), often under terms like self- or emotion-regulation.

4.3.2.6 *Good judgement*

Good judgement activities guide children to consider how to use their strengths for good by reflecting on consequences, taking others’ perspectives, seeking advice, and taking responsibility. Children consider the many decisions they make every day and practise offering advice in moral dilemmas – not by prescribing what to do, but by thinking critically about how to approach the situation. Activities are informed by research on promoting honesty (Barrett et al., 1993; Evans & Lee, 2010), empathy (Dickerson & Quas, 2021), effective apologies (Frantz & Bennigson, 2005), and decision-making (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Conceptually, good judgement broadly aligns with the virtue of wisdom in positive psychology (which includes perspective, open-mindedness, and curiosity) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and is closer than previous topics to more traditional character framings (e.g., Character Counts; the character component of PYD’s Five Cs) (Bones, 2010; Lerner et al., 2005). It also resonates with civic and educational ideals, including *Curriculum for Excellence’s* emphasis on responsible citizenship (Education Scotland, 2025), and, while not framed explicitly as virtue discernment, partly overlaps with *phronesis* (practical wisdom) treated as a meta-virtue within the JCCV’s (2024) Aristotelian framework.

4.3.2.7 Fairness

In the final topic, children explore fairness by distinguishing equal treatment from treatment that accounts for differences, using scenarios and vignettes to compare responses such as compassion versus retribution and identifying everyday ways to act fairly through the other strengths. Activities draw on research on prosocial behaviour, including sharing and helping (Vasil & Tomasello, 2022; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

Alongside good judgement, fairness functions as one of the curriculum's moral strengths, aligned with models such as *Character Counts!* (Bones, 2010) and with existential-humanistic emphases on compassion and justice (Wong, 2006). It also aligns with positive psychology's virtue of justice, which encompasses citizenship, fairness, and leadership (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and with JCCV's moral virtues of compassion, respect, and justice (JCCV, 2024). It is also somewhat aligned with Character Lab's (2026) "strengths of heart", which include kindness.

While many other character strengths (e.g., courage, humility, honesty, and gratitude) could have been included, the selected topics, which already hold a significant amount of content for a year-long programme, are reasonably comprehensive. For example, aspects of courage are addressed through resilience, aspects of humility through self-control, honesty through good judgement, and gratitude through fairness. Children also encounter a wider range of strengths in self-knowledge sessions, which are revisited in later activities and reinforced through wider WISE activities, such as family days. Finally, it is important to note my own role in developing the curriculum, which inevitably shapes my analysis. I explain and address this in my reflexive statement (see section 4.5).

4.4 Research questions, methodological approach, and overview of studies

This research draws on data from children and mentors who have participated in the WISE mentoring programme to investigate the following primary research question:

What are children's and mentors' experiences of character development in a character-focused mentoring programme?

This question is explored through the following subsidiary questions:

- (a) How do children and mentors experience the character-focused curriculum?
- (b) How do they experience the mentoring relationship and its development?
- (c) What changes in outcomes related to character growth and PYD are associated with programme participation?
- (d) To which aspects of the programme do participants attribute change (e.g., specific sessions or elements)?
- (e) How might character-focused mentoring programmes be improved to better support character growth and Positive Youth Development?

This research sits at the intersection of character education, youth mentoring, and Positive Youth Development (PYD). While drawing on Aristotelian character education, positive psychology, and related youth development approaches such as social-emotional learning, it is ultimately grounded in PYD and examines how a character-focused mentoring programme may support holistic positive development in late childhood. In doing so, it contributes to theory and practice across these fields by addressing questions around implementation, mentoring mechanisms, and the role of structured curriculum content in shaping programme experience and supporting positive development.

This research adopts a primarily qualitative approach, appropriate for the interdisciplinary exploration of a novel, character-focused mentoring model. Given the lack of clarity around effective mentoring and character education mechanisms, and the methodological challenge of studying holistic character growth using narrow or decontextualised measures alone (see sections 1.1.4 and 1.2.4.1), an exploratory, open-ended approach is well suited to revealing subtle dynamics, meanings, and processes that fixed-response measures may overlook (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2010). This is especially relevant given that many of the outcomes of interest in this thesis concern not only outward behaviour, but also inner, reflective, and context-sensitive aspects of development, including self-understanding, motivations, purpose, and the meanings young people attach to their experiences. Such holistic outcomes may not be easily captured through broad, decontextualised standardised self-report measures alone.

A qualitative design further supports a richer view of the young person as embedded within a particular relational and ecological context, in line with systems theory and the PYD framework, both of which emphasise the dynamic interaction between unique individuals and

their environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Overton, 2013). This is especially important given the modest and inconsistent effects often reported in mentoring research, which may partly reflect individual differences in fit, context, and the meanings young people attach to their experiences. Qualitative enquiry that directly engages young people and centres their experiences is therefore particularly valuable for exploring not only whether mentoring supports positive development, but how, for whom, and under what conditions it is experienced as meaningful.

Directly asking children and mentors how they perceive and experience character-focused mentoring, which aspects of the programme they experience as meaningful, and to which elements they attribute any benefits, further places them at the centre of the research process and aligns with the practical, person-centred orientation of PYD. Beyond reflecting PYD's emphasis on active youth participation, asking children about their experiences also reflects PYD's focus not only on children's experiences and contextual conditions, but also on how they interpret and make meaning of their experiences and the contexts in which their development occurs (Spencer et al., 2015).

Study 1 explores mentors' experiences across the duration of the programme using an online diary method that includes a pre-diary interview, regular log entries, and a post-diary interview. To my knowledge, this has not been done before. Mentors' views can offer important insight into the effects of the programme and the longitudinal nature of a diary study can shed light on potential mechanisms of change. A related goal of this study is to explore how mentoring influences mentors' own personal development, an area about which relatively little is known.

Study 2 builds on this by exploring children's experiences of the programme. Special attention is paid to their experiences of the mentoring relationship and views on character development. This offers rich data and an understanding of which aspects of the programme are perceived as most impactful by children. Together, these two qualitative studies provide an in-depth account of how character-focused mentoring is experienced and how change is perceived within it.

Despite the primarily qualitative nature of the thesis, Study 3 introduces a complementary quantitative strand through a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control-group design. This is an initial quantitative evaluation of the programme's impact and provides an opportunity to examine whether standardised self-report measures detect changes associated with participation

in a character-focused mentoring programme, and how such findings may sit alongside the richer qualitative accounts generated in Studies 1 and 2. Including this study also reflects the continued importance of standardised outcome measurement within positive psychology, character education, and programme evaluation more broadly. In this way, Study 3 complements the broader aims of the thesis by incorporating a more conventional outcome-focused design within a primarily qualitative, process-oriented study (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Therefore, Studies 1 and 2 address the experiential focus of the primary research question, examining how participants experienced the curriculum and mentoring relationship, what changes they perceived, and the aspects of the programme to which they attributed those changes. Study 3 contributes most directly to the question of changes in outcomes associated with participation, while also examining the complementary methodological question of whether selected standardised measures can capture such change. Together, the findings, interpretations, and discussions of all three studies, alongside the wider literature, aim to address all subsidiary questions, including outcomes, mechanisms, implications, and recommendations for improving character-focused mentoring.

Practically, the empirical studies were staged across successive periods of programme delivery, but they did not follow the same mentors, children, or mentor–mentee relationships across the thesis. Study 1 followed mentors delivering the programme during the 2020-21 academic year, with data collection continuing until April 2022. Study 2 initially involved a separate cohort of children who completed the programme in 2021-22 and was later extended with a second, separate WISE cohort in 2023-24. Study 3 involved programme cohorts across 2022-23 and 2023-24, together with control-group pupils from the same schools and year groups. Therefore, the research as a whole triangulates evidence from different participants and programme cohorts rather than tracking the same dyads across studies.

4.5 Reflexive statement

Given the subjective nature of qualitative and mixed methods research, it is important to assess my own position, perspective, and potential biases (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). I am a part-time female doctoral student from Slovakia. For six years, I worked full-time for Citywise Mentoring. Before I started my employment, I wrote my undergraduate Psychology dissertation

on children's experiences of character-focused mentoring and their perceptions of its effectiveness. This included running focus groups with children enrolled in the Citywise Mentoring programme. This work spurred my own interest in an academic exploration of the topics of character education and youth mentoring, and it also spurred the interest of the organisation in these topics. This led both to my employment within the organisation and to the beginning of my PhD. Beyond supporting this research and granting permission to work with those enrolled in the programme, Citywise agreed to have no further input into the design or delivery of the research. Unfortunately, Citywise ceased all charitable activity in 2023 and shortly after this happened, my colleagues and I founded a new organisation, WISE Mentoring, to continue developing and delivering the same work. WISE Mentoring is run by me and three other Directors, who help to provide balanced governance.

Despite these mitigations, there are still several layers of bias that affect my position as a researcher. I wrote the seven-step programme and am the author of the materials that this research indirectly evaluates. I defined the programme's framework, structure, and approach to character education and youth mentoring. This positions me as occupying an "insider-outsider" space, closely embedded in the programme and its aims, while also responsible for critically analysing its processes and claims (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). While this closeness brings important contextual insight, it also complicates the boundaries between my roles as author, practitioner, and researcher. It also makes it difficult to evaluate the efficacy of something that I have made. Furthermore, all of the above also reflects a deeper personal bias. The reason why I first became involved with Citywise and why I later started WISE is the same reason why I decided to embark on this PhD – because of my interest in and passion about the topics of character education and mentoring and my personal belief that mentoring is a valuable tool for youth character growth.

It is clear that my background and my previous and current roles reveal biases that are likely to have influenced how I planned my research, how I conducted it and collected data, and how I interpreted that data (Harper, 2003). Therefore, I took careful steps to regularly discuss my research and potential biases with my colleagues and with my supervisors. I attempted to bracket my assumptions during the process of planning, collecting, and analysing data (Finlay, 2002). To help with this process, I wrote down my preconceptions as well as my associations throughout the process of data collection and analysis. I also worked with assistant researchers

who conducted focus groups to minimise bias during data collection. During Studies 1 and 2, I kept a close record of how themes were developed and paid attention to inconsistencies and passages that did not fit with the emergent themes as I conducted the analysis. These practices align with broader approaches to credibility and transparency in qualitative research, including noting preconceptions and actively attending to disconfirming evidence (Tracy, 2010).

Overall, rather than trying to ignore these potential biases, I attempted to embrace the role of researcher-practitioner while acknowledging the insider-outsider position this entails. I sought to remain reflective and transparent about my positionality and about the ways in which my experiences with the programme shaped my thoughts and interpretations of the data (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Goundar, 2025).

Chapter 5 Study 1: A diary study exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits

This study aimed to explore the experiences of mentors involved in a character-focused youth mentoring programme. It was guided by the following research question:

How do adult mentors in a character-focused youth mentoring programme perceive their experiences and the development of their mentees?

The primary purpose of the study was to address the thesis's overarching research question from the perspective of mentors by exploring how they experienced the programme as supporting mentees' Positive Youth Development (PYD). This is in response to calls in the field of youth mentoring to embrace the PYD framework (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021), which includes a focus on character growth. Despite interest in this area, few empirical studies have investigated youth mentoring in relation to PYD and character growth, particularly at the level of participants' lived experiences and perceived processes of change.

The study also aimed to shed light on the elements and possible mechanisms involved in character-focused mentoring. In line with the thesis's subsidiary questions set out in section 4.4, particular attention was given to mentors' experiences of the character-focused curriculum and the mentoring relationship, the changes they perceived in their mentees, and the aspects of the programme to which they attributed those changes. Since mentors were closely involved in the sessions but retained enough distance to reflect on their mentees' development, they were well positioned to provide insight into which components they perceived as supporting social, emotional, and character growth. This focus is especially relevant given that little is known about which mechanisms are most critical for achieving such outcomes in character-focused youth mentoring. One mechanism of particular interest in this study was the role of structured, goal-oriented activities in mentoring, and specifically the use of a character-focused, growth-oriented curriculum. This approach reflects what Karcher (2014) termed a "promising practice" in mentoring and builds on research suggesting that incorporating curriculum-based, skill-focused activities may enhance mentoring outcomes (DuBois & Keller, 2017; Lyons et al., 2019).

Alongside shedding light on effective youth mentoring, the study also sought to provide insight into the elements and mechanisms behind effective character growth. This is especially important due to the lack of clarity around what character growth looks like in practice and the lack of empirical evidence supporting character development mechanisms in the character education literature. It followed calls in the field to address this gap by converging with more empirically grounded fields within psychology, bringing in expertise from the social-emotional learning, positive psychology, and PYD literature. Finally, a separate purpose of this study was to explore the experience of mentoring in relation to the mentors, exploring how mentoring and the character-focused curriculum may benefit not only children, but also the mentors themselves.

5.1 Method

5.1.1 Design

A qualitative online diary method was chosen for its longitudinal nature and potential for capturing rich data. This approach was particularly suited to exploring a novel character education model within a youth mentoring programme. By collecting mentors' reflections over the full duration of the programme, the study could explore the experiences, events, and mechanisms of change as they unfolded and fill in gaps that otherwise remain unknown. While a single interview or short entry diary may not be representative of other days or weeks, this longitudinal approach allows for some flexibility and variation, looking at the same topic from different angles and in different contexts while offering a richer and more varied account of participants' experiences over time (Meth, 2003). While extended diary-keeping could run the risk of respondent fatigue (Milligan, 2005), research suggests that participants may engage in deeper reflection over time and grow to enjoy the process (Grant, 2019).

Due to the time-consuming nature of the diary study (Zirkel, Garcia, & Murphy, 2015), I wanted to make use of participants' time most effectively. To optimise the study design and minimise participant burden, I conducted initial research advisory interviews. This followed recommendations to involve participants in the design of diary studies and pilot test diary materials (Bolger et al., 2003; Janssens et al., 2018). Different participants to those who took part in the main study pre-tested materials and provided feedback in a semi-structured interview

on how to balance depth with feasibility. The final design of the diary study was refined based on these insights to enhance both data richness and participant engagement.

5.1.2 Participants

Four participants pre-tested the diary materials and took part in an initial research advisory interview. These were female university students aged 20-22 from Chinese, Indian, White Scottish, and other White backgrounds volunteering for the Citywise mentoring programme in Glasgow. All of the students had volunteered as mentors for at least a year prior to taking part. None of them participated in the main diary study.

The main diary study was conducted with 14 participants (13 female, 1 male). These were university students aged 18-32 from Chinese, Indian, Asian Other, White English, White Other, and White Scottish backgrounds. Two of them took part for the first two months of the study but could not continue due to time constraints.

5.1.3 Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow and organisational consent was granted by Citywise Mentoring (Appendices B1 and B2). Although the study was not expected to pose a significant risk to participants, ethical considerations included the fact that participation could have become a time burden and a source of stress for the mentors during their university studies. This would have been especially problematic if participants had felt pressure to participate because I was a staff member of Citywise. It was therefore made clear that participation was completely voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without giving a reason, and that their participation or non-participation would not affect their relationship with Citywise (for information sheets and consent forms, see Appendix B3).

Furthermore, the nature of a diary study is that participants complete entries by themselves and in their own time. While this is advantageous in offering control to participants, who can discuss their own priorities (Filep et al., 2018), it also means that the researcher is not present to give support. This could have been particularly challenging since it has been suggested that the

diary-keeping process may facilitate personal content that may not have been shared face to face and could be distressing (Milligan & Bartlett, 2019). While the questions were not likely to cause distress, they asked participants to reflect on their experience of the programme, which included the challenges they faced. Therefore, participants were signposted to Citywise's safeguarding officer after completing each entry. They also had weekly contact with their Citywise project leader, where they were given the opportunity to reflect on the diary-keeping process.

Access to the Study 1 diary entries may be granted by the researcher and/or supervisory team on reasonable request, subject to ethical approval where required, data protection requirements, and an agreement to preserve participant confidentiality. Full diary entries are not publicly available because they contain detailed reflective accounts from a small programme context.

5.1.4 Procedure

5.1.4.1 Data collection procedure

Initial research advisory interview

All mentors in the Citywise mentoring programme in Glasgow were invited via email to participate in an initial research advisory interview. Four volunteers agreed to take part after receiving further information. Semi-structured interviews lasted 40-60 minutes and focused on study design and materials (for questions, see Appendix B4). Before the interviews, participants trialled two diary materials for clarity; these entries were not analysed. During the interview, they gave feedback on the diary prompts, interview questions, schedule, and overall design. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

The main diary study

The process of recruitment was the same for the main diary study as for the research advisory interviews. Participation was open to all mentors at the beginning of the academic year, with a clear understanding that they could withdraw at any time. The study began with a 40-minute pre-diary interview (for questions, see Appendix B5). The first half of this explained the diary schedule and offered a chance to ask questions. A short guide on reflective writing that I

compiled from other online sources (Appendix B6) was also shared. If participants agreed to participate, they signed the consent form. The second half included questions about why they had decided to volunteer and what expectations they had for the programme, designed to elicit narratives that could be revisited later (Filep et al., 2018). This portion was recorded and transcribed.

The diary-keeping period took place over eight months and consisted of weekly short online diary entries (~10 minutes each) and two longer reflections (~30 minutes each). Participants submitted weekly reflections (“Please reflect on the session you attended today”) in the form of online diary entries. Secure, personalised links enabled timely submission and data matching. This method was chosen in order to capture immediate responses and reduce recall bias (Milligan & Bartlett, 2019). Participants also submitted more detailed in-depth diary entries two and six months into mentoring (for prompts, see Appendix B7). Unlike immediate sampling or question-and-answer formats in interviews, this offered participants time to think through their answers and provide more nuanced reflections on their mentoring experience and their perceptions of the curriculum, social dynamics, and character development (Morrison, 2012). Data collection concluded with post-diary interviews, in which mentors elaborated on diary themes. These aimed to deepen reflection, provide new insights, clarify data interpretation, and explore which aspects of their experience continued to stand out in hindsight (Filep et al., 2018; Grant, 2019).

Before discussing the data analysis procedure and results, it is important to note that data collection for this study took place between October 2020 and April 2022. Most diary entries were written between November 2020 and June 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The programme continued during this period, but the way it was delivered, experienced, and reflected upon by children and mentors was shaped by the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.1.4.2 Data analysis justification

Research advisory interviews were analysed using broad, top-down, semantic thematic analysis (TA) since the aim of these was to gauge opinions on prompts, the diary entry schedule, and the overall research design of the study. The main diary study was analysed using thematic analysis informed by key principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), particularly its idiographic attention to lived experience, meaning making, and interpretation

(Smith & Osborn, 2008). Both of these provide flexibility as long as key principles are upheld. IPA is “concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience” (Smith, 2011, p. 9). It is compatible with a critical realist framework, which distinguishes between the empirical, the actual, and the real, acknowledges the universality of the particular, and views events as the result of causal mechanisms which interact and interfere with one another in a world of complex, interrelated systems (Jeong & Othman, 2016). This fits well with the study of character development and human flourishing, which is considered to exist independently of the researcher, and with a Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) approach, which is interested in wholes rather than isolating parts (Overton, 2015).

Several principles define IPA. First, it values the participants’ own perspectives of their experiences. It aims to understand how the person integrates different elements of their perceptions, judgements, and beliefs into unified, meaningful experiences and assumes that individuals are actively engaged in interpreting the events of their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Second, it sits within the hermeneutic, or interpretative, tradition within phenomenology, meaning that it seeks to interpret rather than simply describe participants’ experiences. What follows has been referred to as double hermeneutics or dual interpretation; participants try to make sense of their own experience (first hermeneutic layer) whilst the researcher interprets their interpretations (second hermeneutic layer). In the context of this study, there is an added interpretive dimension in parallel with the above, since the participants themselves, who are mentors in the programme, are also trying to understand and make sense of the experiences of the children they work with. Their diary entries often reflect this interpretive effort. This additional layer enriches the analysis, as the researcher is not only interpreting the mentor’s experience, but also their interpretation of the child’s experience.

This means that the researcher has an active role in the analytical process. The result becomes a balance between “giving voice,” i.e., letting participants speak for themselves, and “making sense,” i.e., offering interpretation using psychological concepts to extend beyond participant accounts (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). A major reason for choosing to use elements of IPA in data analysis was another principle that defines it: its focus on the individual and close examination of the unique, particular experience of each participant. IPA is ideally suited for rich accounts of how individuals make sense of their experiences and the meaning they derive from those experiences (Smith, 2004).

The analytic process followed in this study broadly mirrors the stages of thematic analysis, with the difference that in IPA this process is repeated for every individual participant. This was further enhanced by collecting data repeatedly over eight months from the same participants. Furthermore, while IPA refers to *emergent* themes clustered into *superordinate* themes, thematic analysis refers to themes split into subthemes. In IPA, superordinate themes are clusters, or categories of themes, and it is the emergent themes that are considered the main themes. I note that reflexive thematic analysis takes issue with the use of the word “emergent,” which is considered to take away from the active role of the researcher. Despite using this IPA language, I did my best to incorporate elements of reflexive TA into my analysis. For example, I took an inductive approach to analysing emergent themes, looking at underlying assumptions and conceptualisations to prevent a purely descriptive, semantic-level analysis in which themes consist of extracts without analysis or the questions asked end up becoming themes, and theorising the sociocultural context within which individual accounts are embedded (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further reflexive TA elements I used include creating visual representations and thematic maps of clusters of themes, defining the themes, and creating an analytic narrative. This also fits with IPA principles that include looking for stories, how they fit with one another, and what they mean to participants (Larkin et al., 2006).

Throughout the process of data analysis, I also labelled any sections of the data that discussed the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and, for those participants who had mentored the previous year, the difference in their experience between mentoring before and during the pandemic. While this material was not incorporated into the main narrative account, I analysed it separately as an additional superordinate theme. I still drew on elements of IPA, but analysed these data more semantically because they were somewhat more descriptive in nature. This material is included in a separate section of the results because, while it is not central to the research question, it provides insight into processes of youth mentoring and especially the broader social circumstances and relationships beyond the mentoring dyad.

5.1.4.3 Data analysis procedure

Data were analysed on a continuous basis. The research advisory interviews were transcribed and read, and initial codes were generated and collated into broad, descriptive themes across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were not refined or named, but instead used to slightly adjust the final design of the main diary study.

The main diary study data were then analysed using the IPA-informed process described above. Whilst IPA is best understood as an approach rather than a set of analytic steps (Larkin et al., 2006), I repeatedly followed a series of broad stages: immersion in the data (stage 1), noting emergent themes (stage 2), and clustering themes (stage 3). As I read and re-read the data, I used the left-hand margin for initial phenomenological coding, annotating what was interesting or significant about what participants had written or said. This included comments on what was being discussed, language used, context, as well as personal reflexivity. I then used the right-hand margin to document emergent themes. These were somewhat more interpretative, relating to slightly higher-level abstractions. Next, I looked for connections between emergent themes, grouping and labelling them according to conceptual similarities.

I used post-diary interviews to clarify and check emerging interpretations with participants. These were set up to clarify and validate interpretation of data to minimise analytical misinterpretation and provide more in-depth explanations of phenomena. They also offered the space to ask participants about any differences between their experience and others' experience of the programme. After the completion of data collection, the post-diary interviews were analysed in tandem with the diary entries. The same three stages of IPA were followed again, and a summary table of clusters (stage 4) was produced. The roles of participant and interviewer were also analysed, following IPA principles (Larkin et al., 2006). The data from all participants were then analysed together, following all four stages of IPA. The summary table of clusters of themes from the group-level analysis was compared to the main patterns in each participant's data, which led to a further revision of themes.

Attention was also paid to contrasts between the more immediate reflections from short diary entries and the more in-depth reflections from longer entries and from the post-diary interviews. Importantly, the final stages of reviewing clusters, refining themes into clusters, defining these, and producing a narrative account were repeated many times before a finalised account was put together.

5.2 Results

The analysis led to three superordinate themes and ten emergent themes within these (Table 2). The first set of themes concerns the mentoring relationship, how participants experienced it, what they thought made a good mentoring relationship, and how this was developed. The second set explores the process of mentoring with a structured curriculum as opposed to a purely relational approach, including a focus on how the curriculum interacted with the mentoring relationship to support change. Finally, the themes concern the process of growth, how mentees applied their learning to their lives, and how not only mentees but also mentors grew in both intrapersonal and interpersonal ways. Across themes, mentors also described points of friction and constraint, such as uneven engagement, distraction, and the trade-offs between relationship-building and progressing through activities, which are included alongside positive accounts to reflect variability across dyads and sessions.

It is worth noting that the themes reflect the context of data collection, which occurred while the programme was delivered in an adapted form due to local lockdowns. Much of the mentoring shifted from the school setting to an online environment, making it more difficult to implement group mentoring and to embed the programme within school and peer contexts (see section 4.3 for an explanation of the programme's approach). As a result, one-to-one mentoring became more prominent. While this shift did not alter the research question, it did influence the experience of mentoring and, consequently, the thematic focus in relation to the research question.

Quotations in this chapter are identified using participant pseudonyms and references from the anonymised dataset. Excerpts from diary entries include the exact cell number in the Excel spreadsheet from which they were drawn. Because the diary study generated a large volume of data, the quotations presented are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Where several mentors made similar points, additional cell references are sometimes included in parentheses instead of reproducing multiple similar extracts. This was done to indicate the breadth of evidence informing the interpretation while preserving readability.

Table 2

Superordinate themes and emergent themes from a diary study exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits

Superordinate theme	Emergent theme
Elements of a good mentoring relationship	Fostering openness, trust, and vulnerability in mentoring relationships
	Mentee-centred mentoring: attentive listening and personalisation
	Developing reciprocal and empowering youth-adult partnerships in mentoring
Insights on the integration of a character-focused curriculum in mentoring	The mentoring relationship as a necessary foundation for the integration of character-focused activities
	The role of the curriculum in facilitating mentor-mentee relationships and character growth
Experiences of character growth in the mentoring programme	Understanding character growth: how mentees made sense of character
	From discussion to action: how mentees applied the character-focused curriculum in real life
	Developing self-awareness, confidence, and reflection: mentees' intrapersonal growth
	Building social and emotional skills: mentees' interpersonal growth
	Mentor learning and development through character-focused mentoring

Alongside the themes in the table above, one other feature of the data that stood out relates to insights from running the programme during the Covid-19 pandemic. This functioned as a kind of “stress test” of the programme under altered ecological conditions. Mentor reflections on

this context highlighted the importance of acknowledging social circumstances in mentoring, discussed benefits and challenges of online mentoring, and considered relational dynamics to do with family and peer involvement (see Table 3 in section 5.2.4). This provides insight into how mentoring can move beyond the one-to-one relationship and will be described and analysed separately.

5.2.1 Elements of a good mentoring relationship

The first superordinate theme clusters those themes that relate to the building blocks of a strong mentoring relationship. The mentors considered a good mentoring relationship to be a “natural” relationship, in which the mentees felt comfortable, relaxed, and talkative. They spent a lot of time reflecting on how such a good mentoring relationship was developed. Three distinct elements were identified as significant: (1) fostering openness and vulnerability among both mentees and mentors, not only as an observed outcome among mentees but as a factor in facilitating growth; (2) mentee-centredness, or the importance of being attentive to the mentee, actively listening to them, and personalising and adapting the mentoring approach to each individual mentee; and (3) reciprocal and empowering youth-adult partnerships, which highlight the role of mutuality in mentoring and the importance of increasing mentees’ autonomy and independence.

5.2.1.1 Fostering openness, trust, and vulnerability in mentoring relationships

The mentors considered it important that they develop an open, trusting relationship with their mentees. They viewed development in their mentees’ openness as an important aim for their mentoring as well as a means of developing safety and facilitating their mentee’s growth. They also reflected on the role of their own openness and vulnerability in facilitating trust.

Developments in mentee openness and trust

A significant indicator of a strong mentoring relationship according to the mentors was the increased openness of mentees over time. Anna reflected that her mentee had become “far more open” about their thoughts and feelings, “often asking if they can share things with me about their day and even if they have felt emotions such as anger over something that has happened

recently” (Anna, 4E7). Similarly, Nina noted that her mentee was now “much more willing to talk about his own experiences and opinions in depth” (Nina, 4E3). Leah elaborated on this:

“[My mentee] has really began to open up about some deeper emotions, moving away and past the surface level situations and annoyances they might have brought up and reflected upon at the beginning of the year. This has felt like a privilege, and something I appreciate.” (Leah, 4C12)

Leah’s reflection suggests that growth in openness is a gradual process that unfolds as trust deepens. Her description of it as a “privilege” suggests that mentee disclosure is an active choice and that a mentor’s role is to create an environment where mentee openness feels safe and valued.

The mentors reflected on a wide range of factors that facilitated the development of openness. Nora noted how trust developed her mentee’s willingness to share: “I feel as our trust and understanding of each other has increased this has changed how my mentee feels about sharing things with me” (Nora, 2E7). Time played a role, with Veera seeing trust “growing and developing over time” (Veera, 4D5). A sense of intuitive empathy was another key factor, with Shuchang reflecting that “the key to building a good relationship is empathy” with mentees and “understanding of their feelings” (Shuchang, 4D4).

Ava emphasised the role of a “friend-like” relationship in fostering deeper conversations, writing: “It suggests she feels comfortable with me and trusts me [...] I think a casual friend-like relationship enables for better discussion and better growth for us both” (Ava, 3D53). Here, she suggests that openness, which allows for deeper, more meaningful discussions, is facilitated by the presence of safe, informal interactions. Similarly, Nina described how she and her mentee “cracked jokes to one another,” which helped build “feelings of closeness and comfortableness” (Nina, 4D3). While this “friend-like” role must be approached within the context of clear and appropriate boundaries, it highlights the role of fun, casual interactions, light-heartedness, and humour, suggesting that effective mentoring is not only about guidance, but also about creating a safe space where mentees feel comfortable opening up in more vulnerable discussions.

Common interests further contributed to rapport. Rory highlighted the importance of “common ground of things to talk about” and bond over, such as a shared love for baking and crafting

(Rory, 1D3). Nina further observed that “proving to be relatable to my mentee encouraged him to engage more,” particularly when they discovered a shared love of “PlayStation games, and especially, the Spider-Man comics,” which sparked “good chats about our character strengths and our common interests” (Nina, 2E5). Finally, Veera described how connecting over a mentee’s passion led to them opening up about “personal worries, hopes and experiences” (Veera, 3D66), highlighting the importance of engaging with what mentees are interested in and excited about in creating an environment where they feel comfortable to open up.

The importance of mentor openness and vulnerability

A separate factor that seemed to facilitate the development of mentee openness and trust was the mentors being open, sharing, and showing vulnerability themselves. This is illustrated by Rita’s reflection:

“We also chat a lot and relate the themes to both our lives, for example I might ask her of a time something made her angry and how she reacted, how else could she react etc. I also open up about my own experiences, and I make sure I don't always state the good ones. I might tell her about how I've learnt from my mistakes, how I've tried to improve myself, and why it's important. The conversation that stems from both of our real life also helps a lot!” (Rita, 4E8)

In these words, Rita highlighted the power of openly sharing her own experiences with her mentee in their discussions. By not just presenting her successes but also discussing her mistakes and how she has learned from them, she modelled vulnerability for her mentee. This openness likely helped to build trust and create a more authentic and relatable mentoring relationship, where both the mentor and the mentee felt comfortable to share their challenges and learn from each other. This aligns with research on mentor authenticity and appropriate self-disclosure as a way to strengthen connection (Spencer, 2006b; Liang et al., 2002).

Other mentors also echoed the importance of being vulnerable and sharing experiences to make their mentees more comfortable to share their own experiences (Evelyn, 1D35, Nina, 4F3, Veera, 3D79). For example, Veera recounted how sharing a personal story of resilience encouraged her mentee to open up about her own experience, further adding that “giving examples and sharing my personal experiences really helps my mentee to remember what she experienced herself and how to relate it to the activities” (Veera, 3D79). In other words, Veera’s vulnerability not only strengthened their connection but also modelled concrete examples of

resilience and problem-solving to her mentee, serving as a live demonstration of how character strengths can be enacted. By seeing her mentor's struggles and successes, her mentee could better understand and apply these concepts to her own life, making the learning experience more concrete and relatable.

Together, this theme illustrates how mentors experienced mentee openness as a sign of a good mentoring relationship which might lead to growth, how openness was facilitated by trust, time, empathy, a sense of fun, and common ground, and how the mentors' own openness both fostered trust and modelled concrete concepts, helping the mentees reflect on and grow in various aspects of their lives.

5.2.1.2 Mentee-centred mentoring: attentive listening and personalisation

Alongside the role of openness and vulnerability, a significant feature of the mentors' accounts was that they strove to develop a mentee-centred relationship. The ways in which they made decisions, planned mentoring sessions, set goals, and reflected on their roles as mentors all communicated a priority to keep the mentee and their needs and interests at the centre of the mentoring relationship. This played out in two key ways: first, the mentors did their best to engage in attentive listening so that their mentees would feel listened to and safe in the relationship and second, the mentors were intentional in adapting and personalising their mentoring approach to their mentee's unique needs.

The importance of attentive listening

One factor that was seen as key to building a mentee-centred relationship was active and attentive listening (REACH, 2019). The mentors frequently emphasised the importance of being "able to listen" (Rita, 2D10) and being "very focused listening" (Veera, 5D23) to whatever their mentees were interested in discussing. They also highlighted the importance of following up on what their mentees shared. In her post-diary interview, Nina advised future mentors to "embrace what the kids are interested in" and "try your best to look into stuff that they're talking about and come back and have that conversation with them." She reflected that "taking little mental notes" and showing interest helped build connections. Even if unfamiliar with a mentee's interests, she encouraged mentors to "take the time to look into it and be like,

oh, that looks really cool, tell me a bit about it.” This, she noted, was key to forming her bond: “for me that was what kicked off a lot of me and my mentee’s relationship.” While this may raise questions about whether all interests should be equally affirmed, particularly when some may not support positive growth, it nonetheless highlights the value of attentive listening as a foundation for connection and trust.

Beyond just showing interest, Anna emphasised that recalling even small details from past conversations reassured her mentee that the mentoring relationship was there for them:

“I made a conscious effort to mention things that I had remembered from our previous chat and really allow them to feel that I had been listening, which could let them know that even the smallest things they tell me about are heard. [...] I feel that while they may not have even remembered telling me such things, showing that I had been listening to each point they've made to me in the past encourages them to tell me more in future and reassures them of the safe and welcoming space where I (as a mentor) pay full attention to them.” (Anna, 1D34; 3D75)

In other words, Anna felt that her intentional effort to recall and engage with small details from past conversations would reinforce her mentee’s feeling of being heard and valued. She saw this act of attention as key for creating a safe space for mentees to share their needs. This was mirrored in other mentor accounts. Ava described how she made sure to follow up on her mentee’s updates: “My mentee always updates me with what’s going on in her life [...] and I always try to follow up on them to show I’m listening” (Ava, 4D9). Similarly, Nina reflected on a moment when her mentee said, “as you’ll know...,” which she saw as evidence that he recognised her attentiveness: “This really meant a lot to me, as it made me realise my mentee feels like I have been listening intently to what he is saying and that I have good knowledge of who he is” (Nina, 3D70). These reflections also highlight the intentionality with which the mentors approached these relationships – being very conscious, deliberate, and purposeful in how they listened and communicated their listening to their mentees to ensure the mentees felt truly heard and valued.

The importance of adaptability and personalisation

Another key aspect of a mentee-centred approach was adapting mentoring to each child's unique needs. As Anna reflected: “I need to be more mindful of the individuality of each child and what may work best for them” (Anna, 1D34). Mentors emphasised that effective mentoring

requires tailoring interactions to match each mentee because, as Evelyn wrote, “every person is unique, and the learning process cannot be identical” (Evelyn, 3D33). Veera similarly noted: “Every child is very different, and their maturity level is also very different even if they’re the same age,” adding that this often challenged her “expectations of mentoring” and prompted her to adjust her approach to create “more interesting and personalised sessions” (Veera, 4F5). In other words, the mentors thought that since every child is different, every mentoring relationship needs to be different, and that it was up to them to personalise content in order to make sessions engaging for their mentees.

Practically, this might mean adapting the activity, like when Veera wrote “if something was too hard to think about, we simplified the task” (Veera, 3D30). It might also mean changing their approach to explaining a topic. For example, Nora explained how she adapted her approach to better suit her mentee:

“I realised that how we had explained growth mindset to other mentees was not working for my mentee, so I adapted my strategy. I decided to use imagery to explain growth mindset. I told my mentee that people are like flowers because we grow by improving ourselves and by learning new things, just like a flower grows and develops (roots, budding, seeds etc.), and they then understood this better.” (Nora, 3D40)

Effective adaptation to each mentee’s needs often meant stepping away from their expectations and following their mentee’s lead rather than imposing a pre-set plan. Veera described how she adjusted sessions based on her mentee’s interpretations, saying, “I tend to take her interpretation and build everything that follows around it” (Veera, 3D71). It also required both empathy and responsiveness. Linn described how she “tried to have empathy” when her mentee found an activity childish, discussing it “in a more mature way” instead (Linn, 3D13). Veera also highlighted the need for immediate flexibility. Reflecting on a time her mentee became distracted, she wrote: “I had to react to this quickly because I saw that following the regular plan would not work anymore” (Veera, 3D89), reinforcing the importance of adapting in the moment.

The ability to mould a session around a mentee's needs developed as mentors grew to understand their mentees better. Anna described “starting to learn more about the mentee with regard to what works best for them” (Anna, 1D34) and Rita wrote that she saw herself “personally growing and understanding what works best for her [mentee]” (Rita, 3D39). Similarly, Veera reflected on how she learned to adapt activities by recognising when to spend

more time on engaging tasks and when to move on and what kind of interactions her mentee responds to best. She explained:

“As I was getting to know which activities my mentee likes more, I got braver and looked for ways to adapt the Wisebook activities to my mentee’s style. I have learned to catch when my mentee is losing attention and what to do in that case. I used to worry about not moving through activities quick enough, but now I spend more time on the activities that my mentee finds interesting, and I skip the activity or look for a game to play when she starts losing focus. I found out that giving silly example answers to some questions sparks a discussion between me and my mentee where she disagrees with me and gives her own better answers.” (Veera, 4F5)

This suggests that as the relationship developed, mentors became more confident in understanding their mentees’ needs, recognising when engagement was slipping, and keeping sessions interactive and meaningful in ways that followed their mentees’ lead and increased their ownership of the discussion and their learning (Davis & McQuillin, 2022; Legault, 2016).

More broadly, mentors’ accounts suggest that personalisation often involved leaning into different curriculum domains depending on the child. Some dyads spent more time on topics such as growth mindset and help-seeking (e.g., Nora, 3D78), others on emotions and coping (e.g., Veera, 3D102), and others on applying goal-setting strategies in day-to-day contexts (e.g., Nina, 4E3). While these accounts raise questions about balancing personalisation with maintaining the integrity of the evidence-informed curriculum, which will be addressed in the discussion section, they highlight the mentors’ strong emphasis on adaptability and a mentee-centred, responsive approach. Ultimately, mentors viewed the most effective relationships as those in which they prioritised listening attentively, creating a safe and supportive space, and shaping sessions around their mentees’ needs and interests. By doing so, they saw themselves as fostering a mentoring relationship that was comfortable, engaging, and meaningful for their mentees.

5.2.1.3 Developing reciprocal and empowering youth-adult partnerships in mentoring

Interestingly, while the mentors discussed ways in which they sought to cater to the needs of their mentees and foster relationships that were unbalanced in that they were centred around the mentees, they also engaged in reflections about the mutual nature of mentoring relationships and discussed the importance of fostering a sense of equality between mentor and mentee. By

doing so, they sought to challenge the naturally occurring power imbalance between the adult mentors and young mentees and increase their mentees' autonomy and independent thinking.

Reciprocity in mentoring interactions

The mentors frequently emphasised that their relationships were not one-directional but reciprocal, where mentor and mentee could learn and grow together from each other. Evelyn expressed this, stating, "mentoring is not a one-sided relationship because in every session I feel that I learn from mentees as well" (Evelyn, 3D33). For example, Ava described a session where she and her mentee discussed experiences of failure and struggles with "not believing in our own work," reflecting that it was "nice to talk to someone younger and probably her with someone older and realise that at the heart of school, uni etc, we're all faced with the same problems!" Analysing this further, she noted how this conversation with her mentee resonated with her own struggles of being self-critical whilst working on her dissertation and concluded: "I honestly think I probably got more out of today's session than [my mentee], although I'm sure she still took something away" (Ava, 3D68). These reflections illustrate the reciprocal nature of mentoring as a shared journey of self-reflection, in which both mentors and mentees can contribute to each other's growth.

This sentiment appeared throughout the diary entries. Mentors used plural language, to describe their mutual interactions (e.g., Nora, 2E7; Nina, 2E5, 3D77, 4D3; Rory, 1D3, 4D2; Leah, 3D43). They also sought to create a sense of partnership rather than hierarchy. For example, Evelyn noted that sessions ran best when she and her mentee were "acting as a team" (Evelyn, 1D41), and Nina reflected feeling pleased that their mentoring sessions and dynamic "feel more like teamwork rather than mentor and mentee" (Nina, 2D5). Similarly, Anna reflected on a session where she and her mentee engaged in an equal dynamic:

"I could tell that we both enjoyed this thoroughly as there was an equal balance of asking and answering between the two of us in a more relaxed way. For me, this has solidified the sort of bond that I was hoping to achieve as a mentor with my first ever mentee and I believe that this is mutual." (Anna, 3D96)

In this excerpt, Anna highlights the presence of an "equal balance of asking and answering," suggesting that the mentoring relationship was not just about teaching but about exchanging

ideas and perspectives. The mutual enjoyment she describes reinforces the idea that mentoring, when done collaboratively, can be as enriching for the mentor as it is for the mentee.

Mentors facilitated this sense of youth-adult partnership in several ways. They encouraged mentees to ask them questions rather than just the other way around (Nora, 4C11; Nina, 5D7, 4D3, 3D46, 3D105), letting themselves be open and vulnerable and so reducing the hierarchy in the relationship (see “The importance of mentor openness and vulnerability” above). Nora reflected on a time when her mentee turned the question that she had just asked them back to her, asking, “would [you] be able to list [your] own strengths too?” In discussing her answer, “my mentee taught me I should be more accepting of myself” (Nora, 4C11), she wrote, illustrating a true attitude of partnership, where the mentor is not answering questions in order to increase their mentee’s engagement but is truly open to engaging with and learning from their mentee.

Similarly, mentors often completed tasks alongside their mentees (e.g., Nora, 3D27; Leila, 4C6; Ava, 3D68; Rita, 4C8). Nora described how this fostered connection: “It shows them, we are not so different, as I do the same activity as them and they learn that I have strengths and weaknesses to improve on too” (Nora, 2C7). At times, the mentors even switched mentoring roles with their mentees, further emphasising the partnership at the heart of their relationship. Leah reflected on such a shift, noting: “It felt really good to change the roles this week, and I felt like we were able to bond and connect over new things” (Leah, 3D103). Nina also actively invited her mentee to teach her things, describing how “my mentee has been very enthusiastic to teach and tell me things about what he knows” (Nina, 2D5). These reflections highlight how reciprocity and challenging traditional roles can deepen connections, foster a sense of partnership, and reinforce a shared sense of exploration and growth where mentors and mentees can learn from each other.

Increasing mentee autonomy and independence

The mentors further discussed the benefits of encouraging their mentees to take the lead in discussions, decision-making, and their own learning. Anna noted that over time: “I have definitely noticed myself listening more as opposed to always talking” (Anna, 2F8), indicating an increase in her mentee taking the lead in discussion.

Encouraging mentees to arrive at their own conclusions was particularly rewarding. Nina wrote that she would “value what we learned” more whenever “the answers were coming from my mentee without my influence” (Nina, 3D104), as this suggested that her mentee’s answers were reflective of his true learning. Anna elaborated on this:

“I thoroughly enjoyed this particular activity as the mentee arrived at this decision entirely by themselves without any of my influence and it allowed me to see areas where I can potentially help them.” (Anna, 1D20)

In this excerpt, Anna highlights the value of her mentee taking the lead in one of the curriculum activities. This both empowered the mentee and revealed specific areas where he needed further support. This reflection highlights the dual benefit of fostering mentee autonomy: it enhances the mentee’s sense of ownership and confidence while also providing the mentor with valuable information to better support the mentee’s growth. However, increasing mentee independence was not without its challenges. Anna noted that when her mentee took the lead, “distraction was a bit of an issue throughout the session” (Anna, 1D34). Similarly, Nina reflected on a session where she tried to encourage her mentee to take the lead, but he did not, and she had to play a more active role: “This was challenging as my goal from last week was to try and give him more autonomy” (Nina, 3D93). Still, despite these difficulties, they saw autonomy as key to improving engagement and tailoring future sessions (Nina, 3D79).

Veera took this further, fostering independent thinking by encouraging her mentee to challenge her views: “I have been trying to show my mentee that I am not all-knowing and that I am not there to teach the ‘correct answers’. Nowadays my mentee disagrees with my suggestions if they are not sensible or if she has a different opinion” (Veera, 4D5). By fostering an environment where disagreement was welcome, Veera aimed to emphasise that the mentoring relationship was a two-way dialogue rather than a top-down instruction. She reflected on a discussion where she and her mentee had “different opinions on what is a healthy method of dealing with anger,” but rather than insisting on her own perspective, she acknowledged, “I see that my mentee knows what works for her better” (Veera, 3D102). While this may also raise questions about whether a child’s preferred strategy always aligns with evidence-informed or developmentally supportive approaches, it first underscores the importance of fostering autonomy in the mentoring relationship. Rather than only guiding mentees toward pre-determined conclusions, this approach encouraged them to think for themselves. Veera recognised that “it might be that my opinion applies only to my personality type” (Veera,

3D102), showing humility and respect for her mentee's perspective. By stepping back, she reinforced that autonomy is not just about leading discussions but about validating independent thinking.

5.2.2 Insights on the integration of a character-focused curriculum in mentoring

The mentors also reflected on how incorporating structured curriculum activities into their interactions influenced their mentoring dynamics. Striking the right balance between free-flowing discussions and completing curriculum tasks was seen as key to successful sessions. For example, Anna noted that a session ran smoothly because it had a “healthy balance of chatting to one another as well as focusing on the compulsory tasks” (Anna, 3D36). Mentors highlighted two key aspects of this integration: first, how the strength of the mentoring relationship served as a foundation for meaningful engagement with character-focused activities, and second, how the curriculum itself played a role in deepening mentor-mentee connections and fostering growth.

5.2.2.1 The mentoring relationship as a necessary foundation for the integration of character-focused activities

The mentors viewed the closeness of the mentoring relationship as essential to the successful incorporation of curriculum activities. Ava reflected that a good mentoring relationship “enables for better discussion” and deeper engagement “when it comes to the more hard-hitting topics” in the curriculum (Ava, 3D53). Other mentors saw the development of trust and connection as directly fostering meaningful engagement with the curriculum. Nora reflected on this, writing:

“I have noticed a significant improvement in my mentee's ability to engage with the weekly activities. Previously I felt I had to keep explaining activities and the meaning behind them, however I now feel my mentee easily grasps concepts and believe this may be because we have a better relationship. I understand it can be difficult to open up about your own character when you don't trust someone and so as our relationship has developed I've noticed a great change in my mentee.” (Nora, 4E11)

This illustrates how a stronger relationship fostered a sense of security, enabling deeper engagement with self-reflective tasks. Similarly, Rory noted, “my mentee is more comfortable sharing [their answers to curriculum prompts] with me now as we have developed our

relationship” (Rory, 4E2). Veera further wrote: “My mentee is quite shy and reserved, and in the very beginning she was not engaging with the activities much.” However, her mentee’s participation increased over time, and she added: “I got to know her more, I could give her prompts to remind her of her own words and experiences that she had just shared with me, but didn’t know how to apply to an activity” (Veera, 4D5). This illustrates that as the mentoring relationship grew, not only did the mentees’ security and trust grow, but so did their engagement with the curriculum tasks.

Beyond engaging with structured tasks, successfully integrating the curriculum also required balancing these with casual conversation, which was something mentors saw as another sign of trust and comfort. Ava described how natural shifts between discussions of curriculum topics and general conversation reflected a sense of ease: “We have both in-depth conversations about the topics, and general day-to-day chit chat, and our conversations usually flow between both which I think is a sign of comfortability” (Ava, 4D9). Anna similarly observed that her mentee’s ability to engage in discussions both “about” and “beyond the Wisebook activities,” integrating them with “aspects of their day,” showed “how much my mentee has developed in terms of their comfort zone in my presence” (Anna, 3D36). This sense of comfort was reinforced by small, intentional relationship-building practices. Evelyn found that simply checking in with the mentees before doing an activity helped them feel “familiar with each other and acting as a team”, which increased cooperation and made it easier to gauge how best to guide her mentee through the session (Evelyn, 1D41).

Mentors also recognised the challenge of maintaining this balance. Nina reflected on a time she struggled to shift her mentee’s focus to a structured task but ultimately prioritised listening: “I tried to direct him to the task, [but] I eventually gave up and decided to listen. [...] While we are behind on the Wisebook, I feel this was vital to our mentoring relationship” (Nina, 5D22). Her experience highlights how listening and trust-building often had to come first, with structured tasks becoming more effective once the mentee felt heard. Together, these reflections emphasise that a strong mentoring relationship was essential for curriculum engagement. Once trust was established, mentors found it easier to guide mentees through structured activities, helping them engage more deeply and participate more actively.

5.2.2.2 The role of the curriculum in facilitating mentor-mentee relationships and character growth

While mentors saw a strong relationship as essential for successful curriculum integration, they also found that the curriculum itself helped strengthen the mentoring relationship, fostering deeper conversations, a sense of partnership, and mutual growth.

The structured activities provided a foundation for early bonding, particularly when mentors and mentees were still getting to know each other. Anna found that “having the Wisebook to refer to really helped with structure,” making it a “good safety net for times when the mentee may feel more on the shy side or unsure of what to say” (Anna, 2C8, 2E8). Similarly, Nora noted that curriculum activities, particularly referring to the self-knowledge sessions focused on exploring personal strengths, interests, values, roles, hopes, and what matters to them, “developed my knowledge about my mentee and their knowledge about me” (Nora, 2E7), while Nina added that “helping them complete the tasks was very useful in getting to know them” (Nina, 2G5). These reflections highlight how structured tasks acted as conversation starters and helped establish rapport.

Beyond building initial connections, character-focused activities facilitated deeper discussions. Nina attributed her mentee’s growing engagement and willingness to “talk about his own experiences and opinions in depth” to them having completed “activities involving goal setting and resilience” (Nina, 4E3). These were activities that guided him to set goals, but also reflect on the various inner obstacles, negative thoughts, or challenging emotions that might affect his ability to reach the goal. Similarly, Veera observed that “the activities about emotions helped my mentee share more stories from her life and I had a better understanding of what is challenging for her and what she enjoys” (Veera, 3D102). Nina also found that working through structured tasks “allows you to identify any issues they may be having easily, as they may not always directly ask you if they are unsure,” (Nina, 2G5) referencing activities focused on identifying what causes emotions and building strategies for managing these emotions in helpful ways. At the same time, mentors sometimes experienced particular topics or activities as more difficult to sustain engagement with. For example, Nina reflected that “more challenging was the self-control section... I felt that he was less engaged on the whole” (Nina, 4C3). Despite this, the overall pattern across accounts was that, as sessions progressed and mentors and mentees built more shared language and trust, curriculum activities increasingly

supported engagement and opened up more personal, applied discussion. These reflections suggest that the curriculum provided a framework for mentees to open up, allowing mentors to better understand them and tailor their support more effectively.

Joint engagement with the curriculum also fostered collaboration and a sense of partnership (see “Reciprocity in mentoring interactions” above). Rita described how her mentee “always wants me to answer the same questions I ask her,” reflecting on how completing activities together made their bond stronger and “made completing the Wisebook a fun journey” (Rita, 4C8). Anna similarly reflected that discussing curriculum topics together led to mutual encouragement and growth:

“This has worked really well as there is a mutual discussion throughout the sessions... [We] both really benefit from each other’s encouragement and verbal discussion of things that we tend not to reflect on in our own time. Having the platform to discuss each topic together has allowed us both to progress individually and with 1:1 communication.” (Anna, 4F7).

This excerpt highlights the benefits of shared discussions of curriculum topics that neither Anna nor her mentee would otherwise have considered. By benefiting both the relationship and their individual growth, these shared discussions fostered a sense of partnership and made personal development a collective experience. Nora echoed this sentiment, noting that “because we complete the tasks together, we both encourage each other to do our best which is ultimately, I feel, what the activities want us to take home from them” (Nora, 2F7). In other words, working through curriculum activities together led to mutual encouragement, facilitating a joint sense of ownership and commitment to try their best to apply curriculum lessons in their lives.

Mentors and mentees also actively worked on character challenges together. Leah described how she and her mentee “even challenged each other to our own self-control tasks this week, which felt like a really positive step in ensuring that what we are learning is being put into practice” (Leah, 3D88). Similarly, Nina recalled: “[we] agreed to control our stress when we felt it building up” (Nina, 3D93). Setting joint challenges not only reinforced the use of plural language and a sense of partnership and a shared journey; it may also have increased commitment and accountability in applying these lessons beyond the sessions. Taken together, these reflections illustrate how the mentoring relationship and curriculum were deeply interconnected. While trust and rapport were necessary for curriculum engagement, the

structured activities also helped strengthen the mentoring bond and fostered partnership and mutual growth. Through shared discussions, goal-setting, and collaborative reflection, the curriculum provided a framework for both mentor and mentee to connect, reflect, and develop together.

5.2.3 Experiences of character growth in the mentoring programme

The mentors further reflected on how they perceived the programme as fostering growth both in their mentees and in themselves. They described mentees as developing a deeper understanding of character and as learning to identify and connect character strengths to their own lives. They also saw mentees applying discussions of character to real-life contexts, which they interpreted as meaningful change beyond theoretical conversations. Through this process, mentors perceived mentees as showing growth in self-awareness, confidence, and reflection, alongside improvements in social and emotional skills. Mentors also described their own development, including greater self-awareness, confidence, adaptability, and stronger relational skills. These reflections illustrate how structured, character-focused mentoring was experienced by mentors as supporting meaningful development for both mentees and mentors alike.

5.2.3.1 Understanding character growth: how mentees made sense of character

Mentors observed that the curriculum helped mentees recognise character strengths not as abstract concepts but as qualities they could identify in practice and that together formed building blocks of personal development. Leah noted the benefit of introducing concepts such as resilience and good judgment, which children “will have practised” but still “may not be aware of” (Leah, 4C12). Ava described how her mentee applied the concept of fairness to the classroom, comparing it to “some people in her class needing more help than others, and how it wouldn't be fair for everyone to receive the same help” (Ava, 5D18). Similarly, Rita noted how her mentee, after learning about resilience, “realised she's faced obstacles in the past” and “has been resilient,” which motivated her to “work harder” toward her current goals (Rita, 4C8). These reflections suggest that giving mentees the language and awareness of strengths such as good judgement, fairness, and resilience enabled them to reflect on their own context and behaviour in new ways and recognise their capacity for growth.

Mentors also found that the curriculum deepened understanding of familiar topics by presenting them in more tangible, actionable ways. Ava explained that although her mentee had encountered the concept of a growth mindset before, the curriculum activities offered a “different, more hands-on way of looking into mistakes, seeking help, [and] not giving up” (Ava, 3D30), helping her explore specific strategies for overcoming setbacks. Similarly, Nina described how curriculum activities like “negative and positive swirls” (on how thinking-feeling-acting cycles shape resilience), “the fast and slow brain” (on impulsive versus thoughtful responses), and “take charge of your brain” (on managing difficult emotions) (Nina, 4E3) (see Appendix A for a selection of these) helped her mentee develop specific building blocks of character strengths, such as patience and thoughtful decision-making. These also prompted conversations about real-life moments when they had “acted on our emotions,” opening space for deeper reflection and allowing mentees to integrate mentors’ “pieces of advice” (Nina, 4E3). Through these moments, mentees engaged not just in reflection, but in connecting the character strengths to past experiences and future challenges.

Beyond encouraging deeper reflection on individual strengths, mentees also began to see how different strengths were interconnected within a broader journey of development. Leah noted that revisiting topics “gives the mentee an opportunity to fully grasp a topic and see how they do overlap and relate to each other, rather than being a series of separate concepts” (Leah, 4C12), and Veera described her mentee forming a “big picture” of character development (Veera, 3D58).

Nina described one of her “most treasured moments” of mentoring when her mentee understood that “the curriculum was a journey.” Using the Wisebook’s visual layout of the topics (Appendix A), she explained how growth mindset (the second topic) could help him persevere through setbacks during goal setting (third topic), and how strategies developed in self-control (fifth topic) could strengthen his good judgement (sixth topic):

“This was one of the most treasured moments in my Citywise experience so far, as my explanation seemed to have clicked with my mentee, who I presume now views the curriculum as a journey in which he can learn to become more positive in setting and achieving goals, as well as effectively make decisions by learning to control his emotions and make good judgements.” (Nina, 4C3)

She added that this insight helped them both become “more motivated and engaged in each section by realising how each part connects and is significant to our journey of self-development” (Nina, 4F3), suggesting that this understanding was both practically helpful by breaking down character growth into tangible steps and motivating by framing these steps within a bigger picture of growth.

Together, these reflections illustrate how structured engagement with character-focused topics helped mentees recognise, articulate, and make sense of their own growth. The curriculum not only gave them the language to describe character strengths but also helped them understand how these qualities work together in real-life situations to guide decisions, shape goals, and support personal development.

5.2.3.2 From discussion to action: how mentees applied the character-focused curriculum in real life

After identifying and making sense of character strengths, mentees took the next step of putting these strengths into practice. Mentors frequently highlighted the importance of their mentees applying curriculum topics to real-life situations, viewing this as a key measure of the programme’s success (Anna, 3D57; Rory, 3D76; Veera, 3D102). Nora described how her mentee began asking for help in class as a direct result of their conversations about growth mindset, writing: “This is something we had discussed in our last session, so I was proud to hear that he had learned something and [...] I hope moving forward we tackle some new topics about growth mindset and my mentee is then able to apply these new skills too” (Nora, 3D78). Beyond demonstrating how engagement with the curriculum led to real change, this also made her hopeful for its continued impact.

Ava shared a similar experience, describing how her mentee successfully enacted a goal they had set together: “She genuinely carried it out rather than just treating it as a one-time exercise. This makes me so proud and makes me feel like our sessions are having a genuine impact on the way she thinks about the world and subsequently acts” (Ava, 3D41). Seeing mentees actively apply what they had learned reinforced the curriculum’s value for mentors. Anna, for instance, noted: “I think it’s always helpful to refer to the material and actually see elements of the Wisebook in action” (Anna, 3D99). This suggests that mentees were not just passively absorbing the curriculum but actively using these concepts to navigate their own challenges.

Rather than treating character strengths as abstract ideas, they were integrating them into their decision-making and daily lives. This ability to put learning into practice underscored the relevance of character-focused mentoring in shaping real-life behaviours and fostering meaningful development.

Mentors also noted that mentees transferred lessons from the curriculum to other areas of their lives. Nina's mentee, for example, recognised that goal-setting strategies could help him improve his spelling: "He stated that he had attempted to do this before and failed. When I asked him specifically how these would help him, he stated that he had never thought about these aspects of goals before and that to break down how he would achieve the goal would help keep him motivated" (Nina, 4E3). This highlights the mentee's intention to apply goal-setting strategies discussed in sessions (such as breaking the goal into specific, measurable steps, identifying obstacles, and preparing a plan for dealing with them) beyond the context of their discussions, illustrating how structured character development tools encouraged mentees to develop transferable skills, fostering long-term personal growth. Rory's mentee similarly expressed that "she thinks she would be able to apply this process to other aspects of her life. That felt rewarding" (Rory, 3D35), suggesting an awareness of how the goal-setting lessons could extend beyond their immediate application.

These reflections suggest that mentees were not only engaging with the curriculum topics conceptually but developing the ability to translate them into meaningful action. Rather than simply discussing them, they were beginning to internalise and apply them in real-life contexts. This progression, from recognising character strengths to actively using them, suggests that structured, character-focused mentoring can equip young people with the tools to navigate challenges, set goals, and foster personal development.

5.2.3.3 Developing self-awareness, confidence, and reflection: mentees' intrapersonal growth

As mentees engaged with the curriculum and applied it to real life, mentors observed notable growth in their self-awareness, confidence, and reflection. Mentees became more attuned to their own strengths and areas for growth, often recognising qualities they had not previously considered. For example, Ava noted just six weeks into mentoring that she had already "noticed a small difference in the depth of my mentee's understanding of herself" (2E4). This growing

self-awareness was echoed throughout mentors' reflections, as many observed mentees thinking more intentionally about their character (e.g., Rita, 4C8, 4E8; Nina, 1D7, 2E7; Veera, 1D4; Leila, 1D23; Anna, 2E8). Through structured activities and guided conversations, mentees gained insight into how their personal qualities shaped their decisions and actions.

Nina described how reflecting on character strengths helped her mentee build self-awareness:

"The activities definitely did help my mentee begin to think about his traits and talents. I found myself thinking that he had not considered these qualities before, so I reckon these have been very useful for him." (Nina, 2C5)

Reflecting on this further, she added that her mentee saw himself as still in the early stages of self-discovery, which she considered to be a sign of an increased ability to think critically about his character:

"He didn't feel like he had learned everything about himself yet. [...] I believe the character-focused curriculum we have covered allowed my mentee to think critically about what he knows about himself and his reply is a very mature and knowledgeable response." (Nina, 2C5)

In these excerpts, Nina suggests that the curriculum helped her mentee recognise his strengths while also fostering a more reflective approach to self-awareness. His acknowledgment that he was still learning about himself indicated a growing awareness that self-discovery is an ongoing process.

Mentors also reported that this growing self-awareness led to greater confidence. Yaan noted that her mentee was learning to "accept himself more" (3E6), while Nina described how her mentee's confidence grew through recognising his contributions in daily life: "He has come to realise that the things he does in day-to-day life – helping out at home, working as part of a team – are all things that are good, and that he should be proud of himself for" (Nina, 1D12). Leila highlighted how this confidence motivated mentees to set and pursue goals, writing: "I think that the character-focused curriculum is a really useful way of building my mentee's self-confidence and allowing her to recognise strengths and weaknesses in herself and set new aims for herself to work towards" (Leila, 4C6). These reflections suggest that greater self-awareness not only increased mentees' confidence but also helped them identify areas for growth and take active steps toward improvement.

Mentors also observed that their mentees' reflections became more thoughtful and meaningful as the programme progressed. Nina noted that her mentee's reflections had "notably become more detailed" (4E3). Shuchang saw this depth as a sign of maturity: "I think he really learned something, or I would like to say he has grown up" (Shuchang, 4E4). Nora added that her mentee had developed a clearer understanding of the value of self-reflection: "I have also seen an improvement in my mentee's reflections as having completed so many activities they now understand what being mindful is and what self-knowledge is and why we are doing these activities in the first place" (Nora, 2E7). This suggests that mentees began to view self-reflection as a meaningful and intentional process which contributed to increased motivation and ownership of their growth.

While the previous themes suggest that increasing reciprocity and autonomy may be one route to supporting independent thinking and reflection (see section 5.2.3.1 above), the mentors mostly attributed this intrapersonal growth to the curriculum's sustained focus on character and its practical, engaging activities (see Appendix A for a selection of these). Ava noted that "the use of self-knowledge buzzwords throughout the curriculum had obviously stuck with her [mentee] and by the end she was very aware of the character strengths" (2E4). Nina identified several activities as especially impactful: "Some of the most significant activities [...] were the 'My Character Strengths' activity, 'The Citywise Gazette' and the 'Strengths Lists' as these activities helped encourage the most in-depth discussions and reflections" (2C5). Nora highlighted "The Citywise Gazette," a fictional newspaper article activity which cast the mentee as a superhero of character and reframed small acts of kindness as heroic (2C7).

One of the most frequently cited activities was "Animal Strengths," a card cut-out activity linking images of animals to character strengths (e.g., a dog for trustworthiness, a bear for protectiveness). Mentors used this activity to prompt discussion on personal identity and growth. Ava wrote: "This activity really suits its place at the end of the self-knowledge booklet as by this point my mentee was a lot more self-aware and didn't struggle to place her own strengths" (2C4). Anna similarly observed that her mentee, initially unsure of their strengths, learned to identify them independently: "they were able to tell me what they recognised within themselves" (2E8). This suggests that by the time mentees reached this culminating activity, prior discussions had laid a strong foundation for self-reflection and awareness.

Together, these reflections illustrate how structured character-focused mentoring supported mentees' intrapersonal development. The curriculum not only gave mentees the language to articulate their strengths but also helped them see reflection as meaningful and linked to personal growth. This process fostered greater self-awareness, confidence, and motivation for further character growth.

5.2.3.4 Building social and emotional skills: mentees' interpersonal growth

Alongside greater self-awareness and confidence, mentors also observed significant growth in mentees' openness, empathy, and perspective-taking. Many mentees who initially focused on their own development became more attuned to others, deepening their ability to engage with different perspectives. In her first in-depth reflection, Nora highlighted this shift, writing: "The most meaningful change that I have observed in my mentee is their openness with me" (Nora, 2E7), a sentiment echoed by other mentors (see "Fostering openness, trust, and vulnerability" above).

A key aspect of this interpersonal growth was mentees' increasing comfort with vulnerability, emotional expression, and seeking support. Veera noted that her mentee became more comfortable admitting difficulties, writing: "My mentee has become more open about admitting that even a simple thing can sometimes be challenging and that there is nothing wrong with feeling that way" (Veera, 3D89). Leah described a moment when her typically confident mentee showed a new willingness to express vulnerability:

"My mentee has developed in terms of showing their vulnerability and this has been really great to see over the past few months. Specifically a few sessions back where my mentee was having a really bad week and felt quite sad. They were able to highlight this and talk this through, which was a very mature and hard thing to be able to do." (Leah, 4E12)

As well as communicating a respect for the mentee and their privacy, this shows that Leah's mentee grew in their ability to openly share struggles, suggesting that mentoring helped them articulate difficult emotions and use these reflections to connect with others. This understanding extended beyond the mentoring relationship to a broader recognition of the benefits of a support network. Ava described how her mentee learned to see seeking help as a strength rather than a

weakness, writing: “this insight allowed us to further explore how to overcome the fear of appearing incompetent when asking for help” (Ava, 3D30).

Mentees also demonstrated empathy and a certain emotional attunement in their interactions with mentors. Nina described a moment when her mentee noticed she was having a difficult day and offered encouragement: “This was a session where I actually found my mentee cheering me up as I’d had a bit of a rubbish day prior to the session” (Nina, 3D70). She “particularly valued” this, as it showed that character strengths were not just being discussed but actively practised, with mentees demonstrating care and empathy toward their mentors as well. These experiences reinforce the reciprocal nature of mentoring and suggest a possible pathway for mentee character development – through mirroring the openness, empathy, and care modelled by their mentors.

Importantly, the mentors saw these effects extending beyond the mentoring relationship, with mentees becoming more engaged with their peers and demonstrating greater empathy. Evelyn observed this shift, noting that while mentees initially focused on their own activities, they gradually became more aware of those around them:

“I noticed that they began to show more empathy for other mentees and their relationships became more positive. At first, most of them worked individually and sometimes focused on their own activities without even hearing what other mentors or mentees had to say, but as the days went by, they perceived themselves as part of the group.” (Evelyn, 2E13)

This shift toward greater social engagement and group belonging may have been supported by group interactions, reflections, and discussions on character. Just as personal discussions about curriculum topics fostered closeness and openness in the mentoring relationship, they may have also deepened peer openness and relationships. Alongside greater social engagement, mentors observed mentees growing in social awareness and perspective-taking. Ava reflected that her mentee had improved in considering others’ feelings, writing: “It really does show character development that she is able to hypothetically consider other people's feelings, and I hope this is something she will carry into her normal day-to-day life” (Ava, 5D6). Similarly, Anna observed her mentee becoming better at understanding different perspectives and giving “examples of how others may feel in unfair situations” (Anna, 5D17).

Taken together, these reflections suggest that as mentees grew in self-awareness and confidence, they also developed stronger interpersonal skills, including greater vulnerability, emotional awareness, and empathy. Evelyn's observation that mentees initially worked independently but later saw themselves as part of a group further suggests that these shifts extended beyond individual mentor-mentee relationships to a broader sense of social connection. This progression from internal self-reflection to external social engagement demonstrates how character-focused mentoring may support mentees in developing not just as individuals, but also in their relationships with others.

5.2.3.5 Mentor learning and development through character-focused mentoring

Alongside observing their mentees grow, mentors reflected on their own personal and professional development. Just as mentees became more self-aware, confident, and attuned to others, mentors similarly deepened their self-reflection, refined their communication skills, and strengthened their ability to listen and respond effectively. This is in line with previous work suggesting that mentoring can yield meaningful benefits for mentors themselves, including in self-esteem and interpersonal skills (Weiler et al., 2013). Rory expressed this parallel, writing: "The curriculum is helping me to acknowledge these same things about myself as my mentee is" (Rory, 4F2). Anna similarly noted: "While the Wisebook is designed for the children, I have found it to be extremely thought provoking for myself in acknowledging areas about myself in self-reflection and personal development" (Anna, 4F7). Ava elaborated on this:

"The self-knowledge activities throughout the programme have definitely impacted my own growth too. It is often a topic I brush over in daily life and this part of the mentoring programme has forced me to actually sit and think about my own self-development whilst giving me the correct terms right in front of me to aid in this thought." (Ava, 2F4)

These reflections suggest that engaging with the curriculum as a mentor prompted deeper self-reflection, providing a structured framework for their own growth.

Beyond engaging with the curriculum, mentors also described how their mentees shaped their growth. Nora highlighted how her mentee's perspectives challenged her thinking, leading her to reconsider certain ideas. Reflecting on a discussion she and her mentee had about relaxing, laziness, and productivity, she wrote: "This made me realise that there are different ways to look at things and I really enjoyed my mentee's perspective on this" (Nora, 3D78). Later, she

noted that her mentee “taught me I should be more accepting of myself,” adding that this was something she had been working on since (Nora, 4C11) (see “Reciprocity in mentoring interactions” above). These reflections reinforce Evelyn’s observation referenced above that “mentoring is not a one-sided relationship,” as both mentors and mentees learned from each other (Evelyn, 2E13).

Mentors also described growth in confidence and professional skills. Leila noted: “I feel that the curriculum has made me think about my own strengths too” (Leila, 4F6). Rory reflected that, although she was not a very confident person, being a mentor pushed her outside of her comfort zone, “which has been really beneficial for me personally. Especially with my graduation looming and knowing I’ll have to go out into the ‘real’ world, this year of mentoring has really helped me” (Rory, 4F2). Similarly, Nina described how mentoring strengthened her leadership skills, writing: “I definitely feel as though I am improving my leadership skills through leading activities during the in-person sessions.” She added that the experience reinforced her career aspirations: “I am so grateful to this programme for helping give me the confidence to continue striving for a teaching career” (Nina, 2F5). Others highlighted their growth in adaptability, becoming more comfortable “going with the flow” (Leah, 4F12), “taking things as they come” (Anna, 2F8), and “thinking on the fly” (Nina, 4F3). These reflections suggest that navigating the unpredictability of mentoring sessions helped mentors develop a more flexible, problem-solving mindset – a skill applicable in other areas of life.

Alongside confidence and adaptability, mentors reported improvements in their ability to connect with and support others. They described growth in communication skills, particularly in becoming more “welcoming, caring, and enthusiastic” (Nina, 2F5). Importantly, they saw interactions with their mentees as playing a key role in this development. Evelyn reflected that mentoring had made her a “better listener” (Evelyn, 3D33), a skill she developed through fostering a safe, attentive, and mentee-centred relationship. Anna provided an in-depth reflection on how mentoring changed her approach to interactions with others:

“Since starting this programme I have noticed a change in myself. Having never taken part in something such as this, I feel that it has altered how I approach all kinds of individuals and their needs. [...] I believe it is shaping me into a more understanding person, paying attention to finer details and allowing myself and others to enjoy some quiet as well as noise. Not only did I notice my mentee growing with their communication, I also have found this strength growing on a personal level.” (Anna, 2F8)

Anna's reflection highlights how mentoring deepened her awareness of others' needs, making her more empathetic, considerate, and attuned to subtle social cues. This likely relates to the practices described in the themes above, since creating a trusting relationship, following the mentees' lead, and treating them as equal partners all required mentors to develop qualities such as empathy, teamwork, humility, and respect.

Ultimately, mentors experienced meaningful growth alongside their mentees, reinforcing the idea that mentoring is a reciprocal process. Through mutual interactions, reflection, and the application of character-focused concepts, mentors not only supported young people's development but also experienced their own personal and professional growth. Taken together, these findings suggest that structured, character-based mentoring is not just transformative for mentees, but also provides a unique and impactful developmental opportunity for mentors.

5.2.4 Mentoring in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

A standalone area of interest analysed separately from the above themes relates to the fact that the mentoring programme was delivered in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in the UK. There are various specific ways in which this was significant.

First, the context of the Covid-19 pandemic provided unique social and ecological factors which affected participant needs, circumstances, and experiences and which provided insight into the importance and role of acknowledging participants' social context in mentoring. Second, it provided insight into the benefits and challenges of online and distanced mentoring. Finally, it shaped how the programme was run in a way that affected relational dynamics beyond the mentor-mentee pair, providing insight into the role these broader dynamics have in participants' experiences of mentoring (Table 3).

Table 3

Emergent themes discussing the superordinate theme of insights from the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

Superordinate theme	Emergent theme
Insights from the context of the Covid-19 pandemic	Mentoring in a socially restricted environment: challenges, shared experiences, and increased significance
	Benefits and challenges of online and distanced mentoring: insights from Covid-19
	Relational dynamics beyond the mentor-mentee in online and distanced mentoring: insights from Covid-19

5.2.4.1 Mentoring in a socially restricted environment: challenges, shared experiences, and increased significance

The Covid-19 pandemic created a unique social context that shaped the mentoring experience in significant ways. One of the most notable aspects of this was the lack of opportunities for broader social interaction, which heightened the value of mentoring sessions for both mentors and mentees. Rory illustrated this, writing:

“My mentee wasn’t allowed to socialise with friends, so our sessions were one of the only times she was speaking to someone other than her immediate family. And this was actually true for me too. I think this poor circumstance has helped to make the sessions seem exciting and different which I think has helped with both of our engagement, in comparison to last year” (Rory, 4G2).

In other words, in the context of restrictions limiting people to their households, these sessions stood out as a special and meaningful opportunity for connection outside the family. Other mentors echoed this sentiment. Nina noted that after the lockdown was introduced and sessions moved online, her relationship with her mentee “drastically improved” (Nina, 4D3) and that he often did not want to leave the call, preferring to continue their conversation (Nina, 3D4). She attributed this to “his lack of engagement with people outside of his family due to the lockdown” (Nina, 4G3), which increased his need for social interaction.

Beyond making mentoring more valued, the pandemic also created a shared experience between mentors and mentees, which deepened their relationships. Unlike other personal challenges that a mentee might experience alone, the restrictions, isolation, and uncertainty of the pandemic were something both mentors and mentees were navigating together. Leah described a moment when she and her mentee discussed “feeling lonely in lockdown, wanting to see friends and family,” realising that they were both struggling with the same difficulties (Leah, 3D43). Ava similarly found it meaningful to log on each week and talk about “how the pandemic is affecting us both differently but equally as much” (Ava, 3D68). Acknowledging and discussing these shared struggles seemed to reinforce a sense of closeness, trust, and mutual understanding within the mentoring relationship. This aligns with previous discussions on the importance of common ground, mutual sharing, and collaboration, suggesting that the recognition of being “in it together” may have strengthened the sense of partnership in the mentoring dynamic (Lester et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the pandemic also created an underlying sense of anxiety and instability. Leila reflected on a moment when her mentee expressed how happy she was to join the session and see both her mentor and peers: “This made me happy that it could give her some joy to take part in the programme despite everything that is going on” (Leila, 3D6). Similarly, Nora reflected that participating in the programme during lockdown gave her “something to look forward to” and provided “structure and a sense of purpose in a time in which there was little” (Nora, 3D5). These reflections highlight how, in a period of stress and uncertainty, mentoring provided a source of joy, normalcy, and stability. Mentors also reflected on how the sessions provided a sense of emotional relief for them personally, with Leah describing a time when she was feeling overwhelmed but found that the mentoring session “actually made me feel relaxed and forget about the other things that were going on, which was very refreshing” (Leah, 3D81).

Beyond simply offering a break from stress, some mentors reflected on the unique importance of character-focused mentoring during such a difficult time. Ava wrote:

“I think this year is as important as ever, or maybe more, to be there for kids and show them that even in the midst of a pandemic their character growth is important and that they always have someone to rely on for a chat each week” (Ava, 5D36).

In other words, Ava considered it very important that in a time of crisis, the children were reassured that their wellbeing and character were no less of a priority than before. In fact, this context *increased* the need for somebody to reliably be there for the children to talk to. Nora further noted that while the topics in the curriculum were always relevant for both mentors and mentees, they felt particularly applicable in “aiding them during the pandemic” (Nora, 2G7). These reflections highlight how the social context shaped not only the significance of mentoring relationships but also the nature of engagement, fostering a deeper sense of connection and purpose. In a time of uncertainty, isolation, and emotional strain, mentoring provided both mentors and mentees with meaningful interaction, stability, and support, suggesting that in contexts where opportunities for connection are scarce, such programmes may play an even more vital role in young people’s lives.

5.2.4.2 Benefits and challenges of online and distanced mentoring: insights from Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic forced significant adaptations to the mentoring programme, shifting it from an in-person, school-based format to various online and socially distanced models. Some groups transitioned fully online, others adopted a hybrid approach where mentees joined from school or home while mentors remained online, and some continued in person but socially distanced. These changes presented logistical and relational challenges, yet mentors also identified unexpected benefits, particularly in fostering one-to-one engagement.

Mentors generally found that online and distanced mentoring made it harder to connect with their mentees. Rory described this as “the most challenging aspect about connecting with my mentee” (Rory, 4D2). Her group moved from socially distanced to online mentoring three months into the programme. Reflecting on this, she wrote: “I didn’t really realise until I went home for Christmas and we had a few meetings online that my mentee had never seen the bottom half of my face until then, over a screen” (Rory, 4D2). This illustrates how even minor details, like the visibility of facial expressions under a face mask, impacted relationship-building in a distanced setting.

Mentors frequently struggled with microphone and camera issues disrupting the flow of sessions since it is “awkward over Zoom if you are unable to hear or see each other well” (Leila, 5D25). This affected engagement, as Leah explained: “I couldn’t see her face and it was hard

to gauge her reactions” (Leah, 3D6). Logistical challenges also arose, particularly with attendance. Linn noted: “Moving online added a lot of difficulties in maintaining the relationship with mentees. My mentee dropped off the course for about 2 months because of this” (Linn, 4D10). While the reason given was a lack of a suitable device, she thought that disengagement and the loss of school routine also played a role.

Even for those who remained engaged, late arrivals were common (Nina, 3D18, 3D38; Leila, 3D73, 5D10; Veera, 3D79; Anna, 3D106), disrupting sessions and creating additional stress for mentors. Anna described a time when her mentee’s parent “was not responding to the reminders for the session which had begun 30 minutes prior,” leaving her unsure whether her mentee would join at all. She reflected: “This was rather stressful as it worried me that they wouldn’t participate this week, which made me wonder if there was something wrong or if they were reluctant to join” (Anna, 3D60). Not being able to reach a parent also raises questions about what to do if a call drops, leaving the mentor concerned for the child’s wellbeing. Overall, these experiences highlighted how shifting sessions outside a structured school setting introduced logistical barriers to the programme.

Beyond technical and logistical issues, online sessions were widely seen as less engaging and personal than in-person mentoring (Nora, 2D7; Leah, 1D14; Linn, 1D16, 2C12; Rory, 1D39; Leila, 2D2; Nina, 2G5). Leah noted that “it removed some of the fun and normal interactions and occurrences that in person mentoring provided” (Leah, 4G12). Nora’s mentee “expressed that they would enjoy the sessions more if it were in person” and Nora thought that online sessions “are not having the same impact as what it would have if it was in person” because they are “slightly more impersonal” (Nora, 2G7). She concluded that “you can’t truly engage or understand someone through internet contact only” (Nora, 2C7). However, she still managed to build a meaningful relationship despite these challenges, writing: “I am glad that we still have a great relationship regardless of the situation” (Nora, 2G7). Some mentors also made deliberate efforts to compensate for the lack of physical presence, with Rory describing how she tried to be “more open and available this year” to make up for the difficulties of appearing approachable over Zoom (Rory, 2G3).

Online mentoring also had its advantages too. While initially difficult, some found that it became easier over time, with mentors at times “almost forgetting that I wasn’t actually in the

room with them” (Anna, 3D72). Others noted unexpected benefits of joining an individual call or splitting into breakout rooms compared to in-person group settings where pairs scattered in a single classroom. Veera wrote:

“Having a relaxed atmosphere and no interference from other children is definitely allowing us to move at our own pace, talk about anything we want, and not to worry about what others are doing. [...] I feel that I hadn’t gotten so close with my mentees last year as I am this year. And this is mainly because we are working truly one-to-one this year, not in a noisy classroom where kids get distracted by each other all the time” (Veera, 4G5).

In this excerpt, Veera explained that increased privacy and fewer distractions was beneficial to her mentoring relationship. Similarly, Ava reflected that the private nature of online mentoring “has probably given us more time to get to know each other” (Ava, 4D9).

Many mentors also appreciated a hybrid model, particularly if they had already established a bond in person. Reflecting on the transition from in-person to online mentoring, Rory noted that “the foundation of our relationship really helped to make that easier for both of us,” as having built a relationship in person made it easier to guide her mentee through online sessions (Rory, 4D2). Some groups adopted a rota where one mentor attended in person each week while others joined remotely. Mentors reflected positively on the chance to see their mentee in person when this happened (Leila, 1D13, 4D16, 5D25; Veera, 5D20; Rory, 2D3; Nina, 5D19). Nina described her first in-person session with her mentee as a “wonderful opportunity to spend time with him,” adding that he seemed “excited for me to be there” (Nina, 5D22). However, the transition from online to in-person was not always seamless. Evelyn was surprised to find that some mentees were “a little bit shy” in person despite already knowing their mentors online, writing: “We already knew them online, but in person, somehow, we had to introduce ourselves again” (Evelyn, 3D22). This suggests that while relationships built online were meaningful, they did not always translate directly into in-person rapport.

Taken together, these reflections illustrate how the shift to online and distanced mentoring created both obstacles and unexpected advantages. While many found it harder to engage, particularly in the absence of structured school routines, some also noted that the format allowed for greater privacy and deeper one-on-one connection. These insights suggest that while online mentoring might not fully replace in-person interactions, it can be a valuable tool, particularly when combined with opportunities for face-to-face connection.

5.2.4.3 Relational dynamics beyond the mentor-mentee in online and distanced mentoring: insights from Covid-19

The shift to online or socially distanced mentoring during the Covid-19 pandemic altered broader relational dynamics, reducing contact with schools and peers while increasing contact with mentees' families. These changes provided insight into how family and peer interactions shape participants' mentoring experiences.

Challenges and benefits of increased family involvement in mentoring

A natural consequence of mentoring taking place online was that family members would sometimes walk in and out of sessions. At times, this was disruptive, like when mentees were distracted by background activity (Leila, 3D14; Anna, 3D60) or hesitant to speak openly (Veera, 4G5). For example, Rory reflected that knowing her mentee's "parents and brother would be in and out during the sessions [...] definitely hindered our ability to have as open a chat as we have in person" (Rory, 4D2). Even when parents were not directly involved, mentors noted their presence influenced the sessions, with mentees sometimes appearing to "double-check" their responses with someone off-screen (Veera, 3D10).

Several mentors described that once they embraced the presence of family members in the sessions, they could use it for their benefit. Ava described how her mentee's sister initially disrupted sessions, but once invited to participate, "it honestly made it 10x better as she was no longer a distraction from the session but helping with it!" (Ava, 1D36). Leila similarly noted positive experiences when her mentee's brother joined (Leila, 5D5).

Nora took this further, highlighting how mentees joining from home may offer mentors valuable insight into their mentees' lives: "With the sessions being online I have also been lucky to have an insight into my mentee's home life and their family which I have really enjoyed and now feel this has allowed us to become closer" (Nora, 4D11). In other words, she was grateful for the direct and indirect family participation that online mentoring offered, which allowed her to better understand her mentee, develop their bond, and so help her be a better mentor to him. Anna described a shift in her experiences of her mentee's father joining the mentoring calls, noting:

“I admittedly did find this slightly off-putting at points and was aware of myself being more conscious of them being involved in the call than I would previously be when my mentee and I casually chat in our sessions. I tried not to let this impact how I acted, remaining how I would normally do with my mentee and being the mentor that I usually am. [...] In a way, this was almost nice to see the involvement of a parent particularly when playing games in the free time at the end of the call, as well as when my mentee would complete a task and show both myself and their dad what they had done.” (Anna, 3D44)

She continued this reflection two weeks later when her mentee’s father joined the call again:

“I felt myself anticipating judgement from the parent's presence and almost a little nervous about hosting the session whilst my mentee's Dad sat beside them. [...] It initially felt as though I had entered into their own personal space with the call taking place online from the mentee's living room. After some time on the call I definitely forgot about that and began to feel more comfortable, realising that this type of scenario is actually highly beneficial with the mentee's parent gaining insight into the sessions and what kind of content is covered. This has added to my experience with Citywise, getting to introduce myself to a child's family members and see them enjoying the two areas meeting from both mentor and parent.” (Anna, 3D57)

These reflections highlight a shift in perspective. Initially Anna felt nervous and self-conscious about her mentee’s parent joining in, feeling like she was intruding into their home and relationship and worrying about being judged for her abilities as a mentor, her ability to explain the topics, and her ability to connect with her mentee. However, once she was able to accept this, she realised that being present in the calls could benefit her mentee’s parent by giving them insight into what their child was learning and so helping them engage with their child, while also directly benefiting her mentee who could gain encouragement and discuss their own growth with both their mentor and their parent together.

Overall, these reflections highlight that while family involvement sometimes introduced challenges, it also created opportunities for increased parental engagement, which benefited mentors who gained insight into mentees’ home lives and parents who gained insight into the mentoring sessions.

Insights on group and peer interaction in mentoring

One of the most significant changes to the programme as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic was a reduction in group dynamics. Most mentors saw this as a detriment. Before the pandemic,

groups consisted of up to 12 mentor-mentee pairs who met weekly, with group discussions, activities, and reflections fostering a sense of community. Due to restrictions, group sizes were halved, social distancing limited group interaction, and online mentoring often left pairs working in isolated breakout rooms. In-person groups sat too far apart to interact and wore face masks, which hindered rapport-building (Rory, 2G3, 4D2; Veera, 4G5).

For those mentoring remotely while their mentees joined on individual tablets from school, group interaction was almost non-existent. Shuchang noted: “Due to Covid-19, all the session is 1:1, so I didn't talk much to other children. Last year we have many group activities so I knew something about others but I think both forms are good” (Shuchang, 2D9). Veera similarly wrote that while she “wouldn’t say that the coronavirus has negatively affected mentoring” (Veera, 4G5), owing to deepened individual relationships, reduced group interaction was still an overall loss:

“I haven’t really interacted with other kids in our group this year, and last year I got to know the rest of the kids better because we worked in groups sometimes and my mentees were friends with many other kids. [...]. There are some positives in this, I feel that I hadn’t gotten so close with my mentees last year as I am this year. And this is mainly because we are working truly one-to-one this year. [But] I think it might be benefiting kids more to be in the same classroom together and do activities with their mentors, as they could also compare their ideas, get more inspiration and encouragement, and feel that they are not doing this alone. And I preferred our interactions with mentors before and after the sessions, it felt that I was in a very supportive community, which is not possible to recreate over Zoom.” (Veera, 4G5)

While Veera acknowledged the benefits of reduced distractions in one-on-one mentoring, she thought that the presence of peers created a more engaging and supportive learning environment for mentees. She also saw group interactions as valuable for mentors, fostering a sense of community and support.

Most mentors agreed that group-level interactions enriched the mentoring experience. Some who mentored both in-person and online noted that online mentoring enabled greater group interaction than mentoring in a socially distanced setting. When Nora’s group shifted online, she was grateful “to speak to other mentees and mentors more” because before and after splitting into break-out rooms, they were all “in one space” rather than scattered in classrooms like before (Nora, 4D11). Ava described how, despite the challenges of online interaction, her group maintained a sense of rapport:

“I think the sessions being online, while they don't impact mentor-mentee relationships, really impact group dynamics. I think this is perhaps because it's difficult for people to speak in a group online as talking over people cuts other people off etc and you can't really read social cues about when people are going to speak. Despite this, I think our group as a whole has done quite a good job of creating a nice group atmosphere and rapport, and the kids all have fun (especially with games as they ease this online awkwardness).” (Ava, 4D9)

In other words, despite limitations in turn-taking and reading social cues, her group managed to maintain cohesion even in an online setting. The tone of Ava's reflection suggests that she was pleased they had managed to maintain the group element of sessions, a sentiment echoed by others, who thought that playing “fun games which we all enjoyed very much” (Linn, 3D7) made sessions more enjoyable (e.g., Leah, 3D6; Ava, 2D4).

The mentors also saw relationships between mentees improving as a result of group discussions. As Evelyn said, because of group activities, “our relationship became better and I saw some shy mentees feel more relaxed and they made new friends” (Evelyn, 2D13) (see “Building social and emotional skills” above). Veera and Nina reflected that strengthened peer relationships “could be due to us all growing closer as a group” (Veera, 4E5), since group interactions “helped to bring a sense of closeness to the group” (Nina, 3D3).

Mentors also valued the opportunity to observe their mentees interact with peers, gaining insight into their social lives and personalities. Anna described group interactions as “a great opportunity to get to know everyone beyond the 1:1 session,” adding that she “found it insightful to see how [her mentee] interacted with others in a larger Zoom call beyond the two of us” (Anna, 5D2). Ava similarly reflected on a session where “we were split into smaller groups of two mentees and two mentors, and this was really fun as it allowed me to connect and play games with one of the other mentees and see how my own mentee interacted with him also” (Ava, 2D4). Veera noted that seeing her mentee with friends “helped me relate to my mentee's life and made me feel a bit more connected with her” (Veera, 5D8).

Finally, mentors learned from interacting with other mentors and mentees as this provided experience in supporting children with varying needs (Ava, 2D4; Nina, 3D18) and allowed them to observe different mentoring styles. Veera wrote: “It was a great experience to see how

another mentor works with children, since her mentoring style is a little bit different from mine” (Veera, 3D21). She added that co-mentoring in breakout rooms allowed for new opportunities for interaction, with one mentor leading the activity while the other provided tailored guidance, concluding that “this type of group dynamic worked quite well for us” (Veera, 3D21).

Taken together, these reflections highlight that while Covid-19 adaptations limited group interactions, mentors still valued opportunities for peer engagement within mentoring sessions. Reduced group dynamics were seen as a loss, but structured group activities helped maintain a sense of community. While one-to-one mentoring was central to the programme, mentors found that opportunities for peer interaction, whether among mentees, mentors, or both, enriched the experience by fostering connection, collaboration, and social learning.

5.3 Discussion

The purpose of the online diary study was to use the lens of Positive Youth Development (PYD) to explore the experiences of mentors in a character-focused youth mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits. This aimed to shed light on the elements and mechanisms of effective character-focused mentoring, informing the fields of character education and youth mentoring. Using a combination of thematic analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study identified three superordinate themes and ten emergent themes within these.

The first superordinate theme identified key aspects of effective mentoring relationships. Good mentoring relationships were characterised by trust, openness, mentee-centredness, and reciprocal youth-adult partnership. Mentors fostered strong connections by being trustworthy, fun, vulnerable, and attentive, by tailoring approaches to mentees’ needs, and empowering mentees towards greater autonomy. The second superordinate theme discussed insights on successfully integrating a character-focused curriculum in youth mentoring. The mentors saw the relationship as essential for curriculum engagement and for balancing structured activities with free-flowing conversation, while also viewing the curriculum as important in facilitating relationship-building and youth-adult collaboration. The third superordinate theme focused on how mentors and mentees learned with and from each other. Mentors saw their mentees grow in understanding the character topics, connecting them to their lives, and applying them to

practice, all of which helped them to grow in self-understanding, reflection, and interpersonal skills. Importantly, mentors also saw these same effects in themselves, highlighting the mutual benefits of mentoring. The mentors also gained professional skills and new insights through the mentoring process. Additionally, mentoring during the Covid-19 pandemic provided insights into the role of social context in youth interventions, online mentoring dynamics, and relational dynamics in mentoring beyond the one-to-one relationship.

There are three key ways in which these findings contribute to the body of literature on the theory and practice of youth mentoring with a character focus. First, they support the notion that character-focused mentoring can be understood through the lens of Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) theory, highlighting the reciprocal, relational, and multifaceted nature of mentoring in a character-focused programme.

Second, the findings provide insight into effective mechanisms of character-focused mentoring. They (1) reaffirm the importance of relationship quality in mentoring and underline the role of the relationship in mentees' character development; (2) highlight the benefit and possible mechanisms of including purposeful, character-focused activities in mentoring, expanding research that identifies the synergy between relationship closeness and structured activities as the "sweet spot" for maximising outcomes (Lyons et al., 2019); and (3) highlight the importance of personalisation, tailoring, and flexibility in youth mentoring.

Third, the findings offer insights on ways in which character-focused mentoring may expand its scope, including (1) embracing an expansive, flourishing orientation, (2) including broader power, contextual, and social justice considerations, and (3) embedding programmes within mentees' relational systems, calling for mentoring which is more strength-based, socially conscious, and relationally embedded.

5.3.1 Examining character-focused mentoring through a PYD and RDS lens

The findings provide support for the idea that character-focused mentoring can be conceptualised through the lens of Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Relational Developmental Systems (RDS). The results suggest that the mentoring relationship can be understood as an *adaptive developmental regulation*, i.e., a mutually beneficial interaction

between a young person and their environment that aligns with the young person's needs, personal strengths, and context, and fosters their personal growth (Lerner et al., 2011). The bidirectional definition of an adaptive developmental regulation emphasises reciprocity between a child and their context, including people and organisations around them (Geldhof et al., 2015), which was a key feature of the data. Mentoring was an active, dynamic process that depended on mentee as well as mentor and benefited not only the mentees but also facilitated reciprocal benefits for the mentor. The mentors and mentees learned from and grew with each other, engaging in two-way exchanges based on mutual interest and respect and both growing in depth of reflection, understanding, empathy, and perspective-taking (Weiler et al., 2013).

Several PYD and RDS principles were especially evident in the findings. The PYD principle of individuality, or focusing on the unique needs of specific young people in specific contexts at specific times (Lerner et al., 2015), was clearly reflected in how mentors reflected on the individuality of each child and how they personalised their approach, adapting the content, focus, format, and pace to each mentee's strengths, needs, and context. The PYD principles of agency and autonomy, or viewing young people as active participants in their development (Larson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), was represented in mentors' efforts to cultivate autonomy by encouraging mentees to take the lead in their own learning, lead conversations and, at times, take on mentoring roles themselves. The RDS principle of relationism, which frames development as the result of a complex interplay of dynamic, mutually interacting factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Overton, 2015), was especially pronounced in how mentors viewed development as emerging from a variety of dynamic, interrelated factors (Bell, 2019; Overton, 2013). For example, trust and openness were seen as mutually reinforcing, as were the mentoring relationship and curriculum-based learning, and mentor vulnerability, mentee empowerment, reciprocity, and shared curriculum engagement were all seen as supporting an equal, collaborative youth-adult partnership.

The results also highlight the ecological context of mentoring, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting the ecological systems perspective of PYD and RDS theory. First, the findings support the notion that a mentor can be framed as an ecological asset that helps to promote PYD. This builds on the PYD understanding that the presence of caring adults, positive and sustained adult-child relationships, and active adult-youth collaborations are ecological assets (Benson & Scales, 2009; Liang et al., 2013; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). It is also in line

with Erdem et al. (2016) who theorised that a mentor could be viewed as an ecological asset by virtue of helping the mentee build connection. However, it goes further, suggesting that a mentor can be framed this way more broadly by providing safety and trust, creating an environment that fosters openness and vulnerability, and helping the mentee develop confidence, perspective-taking, and other intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

Second, mentors observed that relational contexts (i.e., family, peers, and schools) enhanced mentees' engagement and the relational impact of mentoring. This further highlights the principle of relationism and adds complexity to the mutual reinforcement discussed above to describe not just a two-way interplay between the mentoring relationship and curriculum activities, but a three-way interplay between these and the broader ecological context. Third, the mentors noted that the lack of broader social opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic amplified the value of mentoring. This is in line with a PYD perspective that points to the mentor as an ecological asset within an adaptive developmental process and fosters a broader understanding of character-focused mentoring as a contextually embedded phenomenon affected by the mentee's wider ecological context.

5.3.2 Insight into effective mechanisms of character-focused mentoring

The findings shed light on some of the elements and mechanisms behind effective character-focused mentoring. First, they highlight the role of relational factors such as trust and reciprocity in mentoring and emphasise the benefits of a relational approach for character development. Second, they discuss processes related to the integration of structured activities in mentoring, also offering insight into the mechanisms of instruction and application in character development. Together, these mechanisms also map onto the classic character education pathways of character being “caught” through relational ethos and modelling, “taught” through structured curriculum opportunities, and “sought” through practice and application beyond sessions (Allen & Rhind, 2019; JCCV, 2024; Lyons et al., 2019). Finally, they raise important considerations about balancing personalisation and adaptability with universal, objective approaches and outcomes.

5.3.2.1 The role of relational factors in facilitating character-related growth in mentoring

First, the findings reinforce the importance of relationship quality in effective mentoring, emphasising the central role of an emotional bond characterised by trust and openness and the progression from initial connection to a deeper, growth-focused relationship. Mentoring relationships created a safe space for reflection and growth, enhancing mentees' self-awareness, confidence, openness, vulnerability, empathy, and perspective-taking. These outcomes align with the aims of PYD and character frameworks that seek to build youth confidence, connection, ethical behaviour, caring, and compassion (Character Lab, 2026; Davidson et al., 2008).

The results suggest that the relational bond might be what underlies all mentoring processes and outcomes, including depth of reflection, engagement with structured reflections, self-understanding, and social-emotional growth. For example, mentor attentive listening was seen as facilitating the development of trust and openness. As mentees grew in trust, they became more willing to share personal experiences and as their openness grew and they engaged more deeply, their sense of security in the relationship strengthened. This facilitated self-exploration and encouraged deeper conversations and deeper engagement with the character-focused material, leading to joint discussions of mentees' real-life challenges.

Such evidence is in line with and expands research that identifies the emotional bond as the “active ingredient” in mentoring (Li & Julian, 2012). Building on Rhodes' (2005) developmental model and Goldner and Ben-Eliyahu's (2021) emphasis on the emotional dimension as the first of three elements of high-quality mentoring relationships, it highlights how mentor authenticity and attunement contribute to mentee cognitive and emotional benefits (Donlan, McDermott, & Zaff, 2017; DuBois et al., 2011; Pryce et al., 2018). The emphasis on relationship quality also mirrors findings in clinical research, which finds the quality of the therapeutic alliance to be the most consistent predictor of positive outcomes (Gabbard, 2014; Paley & Lawton, 2001). Furthermore, through this relational process and through discussing mentees' real-life challenges, mentors likely helped guide mentees through navigating potentially complex life situations, which may foster phronesis (practical wisdom), considered the overarching meta-virtue by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (JCCV, 2024).

Alongside facilitating openness and personal discussion, the findings suggest that the mentors modelled openness, empathy, and care to their mentees. Experiencing their mentor caring for them, listening to them, and empathising with them prompted mentees to reciprocate such caring – as illustrated when a mentee tried to cheer up their mentor when they were having a bad day. Equally, the mentors also modelled reflections on and engagement with the character strengths, including sharing concrete examples from their own lives. This is in line with character being “caught” through ethos, care, and modelling and the Aristotelian idea that role models, especially those with whom young people form meaningful, emotional connections, can serve as living examples of virtues for young people to imitate (Birdwell et al., 2015; Carr, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2015). The development of social awareness and perspective-taking may have been further aided by broader relationships in the group, seeing others interact with one another, and group reflections and discussions on character-related topics, which can similarly foster openness and closeness with other mentees and deepen their attunement to others. Overall, these effects reflect previous findings that have found interactions between a mentor and mentee to assist the mentee in developing an awareness of others’ needs and developing their character, compassion, and caring (Austin et al., 2020; Erdem et al., 2016). It also aligns with PYD’s focus on the importance of connection as a critical developmental asset, as well as the presence of caring adults, positive peer relationships, and involvement in community as key ecological assets promoting youth development (Benson & Scales, 2009; Donovan et al., 2025; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

Beyond an emotional connection, the findings emphasise the importance of several other relational elements. First, in line with Goldner and Ben-Eliyahu’s (2021) emphasis on the recreational dimension as the second of three ingredients of high-quality mentoring relationships, they capture the importance of recreational, i.e., casual, playful, and non-prescriptive, interactions for relationship-building. The mentors saw these as facilitating the development of a natural, relaxed relationship. Recreational activities included games, humour, and day-to-day “chit chat,” which mentors saw as increasing how enjoyable sessions were and how talkative mentees got. This supports previous findings that recreational activities enhance mentoring outcomes (Austin et al., 2020; Jarjoura et al., 2018).

Second, the findings highlight the importance of reciprocity, partnership, and collaboration in mentoring relationships. Mentors noted a shift from initially leading conversations to listening

more as the relationship evolved, reflecting prior research on the transition from mentor-driven to mentee-driven interactions in effective mentoring (Bowers et al., 2015; Li & Julian, 2012). This finding also aligns with PYD's focus on gradual growth in autonomy and agency as an important factor in youth development (Donovan et al., 2025; Larson, 2006). Importantly, this reciprocity also appeared in mentors' own accounts of change, as they described growing in parallel to their mentees (e.g., in self-reflection and interpersonal skills), consistent with evidence that mentoring can yield benefits for mentors (Weiler et al., 2013). Third, shared interests, experiences, and perceived commonalities between mentors and mentees were also seen as fostering connection, again in line with previous research (DuBois et al., 2011; Herrera et al., 2025). These factors appeared to interact, as shared experiences of difficulty strengthened trust, while common interests facilitated casual, enjoyable conversations. Finally, these findings may provide support for near-peer mentoring, since being close in age might increase opportunities for commonalities, relatability, and the development of reciprocal and empowering youth-adult partnerships (Karcher, 2014).

5.3.2.2 The role of character-focused activities in mentoring: finding the “sweet spot”

The mentors also attributed some of their mentees' growth to the curriculum's reflective activities on character-related topics such as the growth mindset, goal setting, and emotions. Such activities facilitated deeper discussions, promoted mindful reflection and self-awareness, and helped mentees develop motivation to grow in and apply the character strengths. This aligns with Goldner and Ben-Eliyahu's (2021) third ingredient of high-quality mentoring relationships, the promoting-catalysing dimension, which involves processes that encourage goal orientation, motivation, and skill-building, aligning with the structured, reflective activities in the curriculum. The findings also follow calls within group mentoring to engage in the “promising practice” of following a curriculum which seeks to promote positive youth development and orient the mentor and mentee towards learning from each other (Karcher, 2014).

The findings provide insights on several ways in which the presence of a character-focused curriculum may have promoted mentee character development. First, the mentors saw value in introducing mentees to character strengths that they had practised but were not aware of, helping them to understand and identify them. This contributed to their self-understanding, self-awareness, and confidence. It also helped them to recognise character strengths not as abstract

concepts, but as qualities connected to their lives, which facilitated deeper reflection and the setting of aims for their own growth. Discussion of the character strengths also helped them to see these as overlapping qualities that contribute to broader personal development, further increasing their motivation to set and track goals related to them. This aligns with the JCCV's emphasis on the value of character being "taught" through direct instruction (JCCV, 2017; Morgan, 2017).

Second, the findings highlight application of character strengths as the cornerstone of successful character development. The mentors viewed the effectiveness of the programme as dependent on whether the mentees could apply its topics to their lives. This included immediate translation to action as well as the ability to apply the character strengths in other areas of their lives. It resonates with the broader Aristotelian understanding of character education, which sees character virtues as "sought" through applied practice and habit (Arthur, 2003; Kristjánsson, 2013; MacIntyre, 1981); a perspective which is also in line with contemporary research on the cultivation of skills and 'learning by doing' (Dugger, 2015; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2007).

Importantly, the results strongly suggest a synergistic relationship between relational quality and structured activities; a strong mentoring bond facilitated mentee growth in social and emotional skills whilst also enhancing mentee engagement with the curriculum and, conversely, engagement in character-focused tasks facilitated self-understanding and depth of reflection whilst also deepening trust and collaboration. This is consistent with previous research which has found that while strong relational bonds are foundational to successful mentoring, purposeful evidence-based activities that meet the standards of developmental and prevention science are essential for maximising impact (Cavell & Elledge, 2014; Christensen et al., 2020). Lyons et al. (2019) described this synergy, when close relationships and instrumental activities work together for the best results, as the "sweet spot" of mentoring. The current findings extend this argument to a more content-rich form of structured activity, showing how a character-focused curriculum may provide shared language, prompts, and practices that both support strength-building and deepen the mentoring relationship.

On the one hand, alongside the benefits of the mentoring relationship described above, the mentors saw the relationship as enhancing engagement with, and benefit from, the curriculum tasks. This was true both for the emotional dimension and the recreational dimension of relationships. Emotionally, the curriculum specifically targeted character strengths and

included personal, sometimes hard-hitting, questions, such as questions about experiences of failure or difficulty. The mentors saw the development of trust as a necessary foundation for successful engagement with, and discussion of, such questions. This mirrors findings from clinical research that the quality of the therapeutic relationship not only predicts therapy outcomes in relationship models but also facilitates engagement with structured treatment models such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (Cronin et al., 2015). Recreationally, the presence of a natural connection characterised by casual conversation and humour was also seen as a condition for engagement with the purposeful activities. Such a connection may motivate mentees to engage with structured activities. It is consistent with research which finds that positive teacher-student relationships promote pupil motivation, goal orientation, and learning (Koca, 2016).

The findings further suggest that a mentor can act as an especially effective guide through the character development processes of learning to recognise, identify, articulate, and apply character strengths detailed above. This is primarily due to the personalised approach that mentoring offers. First, mentors helped to embody and bring to life otherwise abstract topics by providing concrete examples of character strengths from their own life. Second, they personalised curriculum content to make it relevant to their mentees' specific circumstances. A close relationship enabled mentors to reference prior discussions and help complete activities, such as helping their mentee identify their strengths. Third, mentors tailored their approach, explanations, and even activity formats to their mentees' unique needs, interests, and strengths. Fourth, they flexibly adapted their approach in response to emotional or contextual cues, emphasising the importance of immediately responding to said cues. For instance, one mentor discussed changing their priority on the spot to listening and emotionally supporting their mentee when they were going through something, even though they had wanted to cover curriculum tasks, and this meant falling behind on these. Fifth, they could help the mentees apply these to their lives in a way that considers their specific life circumstances.

On the other hand, engaging in curriculum tasks also seemed to deepen the mentor-mentee connection. This echoes DuBois and Keller (2017) who found that mentoring with a thriving-oriented curriculum strengthened not only youth developmental outcomes, but also youth levels of perceived support from adults. This could have been facilitated by the topics and questions in the curriculum, which prompted the mentors and mentees to share aspects of their personal

lives with each other. As they opened up about these topics, the mentees deepened their trust in the relationship while the mentors got to know the mentees better and learned how best to support them. The relationship was further developed through collaboration and the joint application of the curriculum. Setting joint goals and applying topics to both of their lives may have facilitated a shared sense of commitment, ownership, and mutual accountability through being “in it together.” This is in line with the relational and dynamic principles of PYD and RDS theory that highlight the role of co-creation of mutually adaptive interactions for positive development (Overton, 2013). Crucially, this collaboration may also have supported application through increasing agency and internalisation: by treating children as partners in making sense of the material and setting goals, the mentors may have increased their mentees’ active participation in their own development and commitment to translating curriculum topics into strategies they could practise and apply in everyday contexts (Davis & McQuillin, 2022; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Weinstein et al., 2012).

Finally, a short note on curriculum topics. In order to facilitate personal sharing and contribute to the development of trust, the curriculum topics need to be personally relevant and in order to target developmental outcomes and facilitate collaboration and joint application, the topics need to be developmentally appropriate and applicable to mentees’ lives. Furthermore, mentors described the moments when these concepts resonated with their mentees’ personal experiences and when their mentees were able to apply them as rewarding and heart-warming. Experiencing such engagement as worthwhile likely encouraged mentors and facilitated a positive attitude towards their mentees, which may have further improved the quality of the mentoring relationship. Finally, alongside facilitating progression in the mentoring relationship by deepening openness and trust (Li & Julian, 2012), the activities may also have helped to positively progress the mentoring to its final stages (Keller, 2005b) of ending the relationship by framing the mentoring as a journey progressing through a set-out learning framework.

5.3.2.3 Finding the right balance between personalised and universal approaches: the role of adaptability and child agency in character-focused mentoring

As discussed above, the mentors highlighted personalisation and flexibility as essential for integrating structured activities. These were often paired with an emphasis on fostering mentee agency by encouraging independent thinking, disagreement, and finding what works best for them. Such a child-centred approach aligns with the principles of PYD and RDS, which

emphasise bottom-up, flexible responses tailored to youth needs rather than rigid, one-size-fits-all models (Lerner et al., 2015). However, it raises two important questions. First, how to balance adaptability with maintaining the quality and consistency of an evidence-informed curriculum; and second, how to reconcile a child-led approach with frameworks that promote universal, more objective standards of healthy, positive development.

The first relates to a broader tension between flexible, developmentally responsive approaches and more standardised programme models. Character education and PYD often value adaptability but can face challenges around operationalisation and implementation guidance (Lerner et al., 2011; Tolan et al., 2016). On the other hand, more structured and standardised practices, including some versions of social-emotional learning (SEL), offer greater clarity and a stronger evidence-informed toolkit, but may risk insufficient attention to individual differences and local context (Kozina, 2021). One resolution may lie in integrating these approaches by using structured, evidence-informed tools within flexible, mentor-led delivery. The current findings offer initial insight into the feasibility of such integration. Practically, much of the personalisation described by mentors, such as using a personal analogy to explain a character strength, concerned how specific structured activities were completed. This suggests that mentors were often able to adapt delivery while broadly preserving the framework of the evidence-informed curriculum.

Embracing the unique strengths of one-to-one mentoring may also help with this tension. A mentor's ability to meet a child where they are, cognitively and emotionally, may be more important than strictly following protocol. For example, if a child is not responsive to a certain evidence-based technique, is in a distressed state, does not understand it, or is otherwise unable to complete the activity, then the activity is unlikely to achieve its intended aim regardless of its empirical backing. Effective mentoring may come down to successfully navigating listening, role modelling, discussing the mentee's everyday struggles, helping the mentee identify and apply character strengths, guiding them through reflective activities, and offering advice. The results suggest that the mentors became better able to recognise when engagement was slipping and better able to cater to their mentees' emotional and cognitive needs over time. Negotiating the tensions between their various roles, including following evidence-informed curriculum activities and meeting the child where they are, may improve with experience and should perhaps be included in mentor training. This would be in line with research that effective

mentors fluidly move between the various components of high-quality relationships, balancing their different roles as friend, teacher, guide, sounding board, and empathetic and reliable listener (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Luo & Stoeger, 2023). It may also expand on Lyons et al. (2019) by suggesting that the “sweet spot” of mentoring differs at different times and in different contexts, shifting depending on the child’s evolving needs.

The second tension concerns child agency versus normative standards of character development. This is raised by an entry in which one mentor finds that she and her mentee disagree on what is a healthy method of dealing with anger. Instead of trying to persuade her mentee otherwise, she respects her view. Developing autonomy and independence is a central tenet of PYD and positive psychology, which takes the view that young people are autonomous individuals who have the capacity to make choices to nurture their strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Tolan et al., 2016). However, this raises the question of what happens when a child favours methods which are not aligned with an ethical framework or research-backed practices.

Here, a positive psychology and Aristotelian-inspired character education framework can offer a way forward, as these recognise an objective basis for flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2013; Seligman, 2011) (see sections 1.2.5 and 4.2) and support the use of frameworks and evidence-based tools. In the current study, this is embodied in the curriculum book, which is presented as an objective framework on which mentors and mentees can draw. However, it also focuses on the whole person and values their intentions, choices, and inner motivation. From a developmental perspective, young people need to internalise and personally engage with the topics and any strategies offered, and for this to occur, it is likely that mentors would need to foster open, respectful dialogue and not impose top-down solutions. In fact, this might be a key mechanism of change in character-focused mentoring. Supporting children’s autonomy increases their sense of ownership, internalisation, and self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Legault, 2016; Weinstein et al., 2012). In this sense, treating children as partners and allowing them to question, disagree, and adapt strategies to their own context may be key to whether curriculum content translates into lived practice, rather than remaining a set of externally endorsed “right answers” (Davis & McQuillin, 2022). At the same time, the mentor’s role is not to withdraw guidance, but to offer *guided autonomy*, which centres and increases youth agency whilst holding this within ethical and developmental scaffolds, helping children link

their own interpretations to evidence-based strategies and to the programme's broader flourishing orientation (Kristjánsson, 2013; Seligman, 2011).

Ultimately, finding the right balance between structure and flexibility and between guidance and autonomy could well be what lies at the heart of effective mentoring. Future research could further explore this balance, what is involved in developing the judgement to navigate such tensions, and what training or supervision might best support mentors' ability to do so. Longitudinal research could further examine how these dynamics shift across time and developmental stages, and how they relate to long-term outcomes in both character growth and broader developmental domains.

5.3.3 Expanding the scope of character-focused mentoring

Finally, the findings offer insights on ways in which character-focused mentoring can expand its scope. This includes embracing an expansive, flourishing narrative, expanding beyond the traditional one-to-one mentoring relationship to address issues of power dynamics, hierarchy, and social justice, and embedding the mentoring into young people's relational systems, including their schools, families, and peer networks, leading to flourishing-oriented, socially conscious, relationally embedded practice.

5.3.3.1 An expansive, flourishing approach to character-focused mentoring

First, the findings support an expansive, flourishing narrative of character-focused mentoring over narrowly defined, achievement-focused, or deficit-oriented approaches. Mentors attributed their mentees' growth to a wide range of curriculum topics, at different points referencing activities involving goal setting, activities about emotions, self-control tasks, discussions about stress, resilience, good judgement, and fairness activities, discussions on making decisions and managing emotions, growth mindset tasks, discussions about mistakes, overcoming challenges, and asking for help, and self-knowledge activities. They seemed to view the combination of these broadly targeted activities as supporting mentees in their "journey of self-development," deepening their self-reflection, self-acceptance, engagement, confidence, emotional management, openness, empathy, and ability to treat others fairly and form deeper, more meaningful connections. This is in line with an expansive view of character, which incorporates a range of positive qualities which can help young people put into practice

the ideals of character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Durlak et al., 2011; Hatchimonji et al., 2022; Lapsley & Yeager, 2012) and with calls for character education to converge with the more expansive and empirically grounded field of SEL (Elias et al., 2014; Yuan et al., 2025; Zakrzewski, 2021). By especially highlighting the role of increased openness and deeper reflection (including meta-reflectiveness, or reflecting on the benefits of reflecting), they also suggest connections to phronesis and metacognition, considered by some to be the key, overarching skill in lifelong learning (Fadel, 2015; JCCV, 2024; Sale, 2020).

Importantly, the mentors also emphasised their mentees' strengths, reflected on the ways they were learning from their mentees, saw mentee growth as inherently meaningful, and saw their mentees' inner development, such as their self-understanding, reflection, and openness to others, as goals in and of themselves rather than means to external achievements or outward behaviours. This reflects a "being" over a "doing" approach to development (Shek et al., 2019) and is in line with the strength-based, flourishing-oriented narratives of character endorsed by Aristotelian and positive psychology perspectives, which emphasise wellbeing and flourishing as the end goal of character growth (Abid & Ahmed, 2016; Carr, 2012; MacIntyre, 1981; Seligman, 2011, 2019). It comes in contrast with the deficit-oriented as well as utilitarian frameworks of character education and youth mentoring critiqued in previous chapters (see sections 1.2.1, 1.2.2, 1.2.3.2, and 3.2.3).

Moreover, it is worth noting that a thriving-oriented approach may also be crucial for structured curriculum activities to effectively strengthen mentoring relationships. This contrasts with problem-focused mentoring models, such as Cavell, Spencer, and McQuillin's (2021) bilateral framework of mentoring. This usefully balances the mentoring relationship with targeted, evidence-based interventions, but is more strongly rooted in prevention-focused traditions concerned with addressing problems or reducing risk. The current results suggest that a thriving orientation centred on strengths, agency, and empowerment may be especially compatible with mutual respect and trust. Whilst a problem orientation may lead to a reduction of specific problem behaviours such as aggression or academic failure, it may risk framing the mentoring relationship as corrective and undermine its potential to develop a deep, trusting bond. More research would be needed to further evaluate this, but previous studies that have found purposeful activities to enhance relational quality also included activities that were thriving-oriented and that promoted positive engagement and fostered a sense of purpose (DuBois & Keller, 2017; Rhodes, 2020).

5.3.3.2 Challenging power dynamics in character-focused mentoring

The findings further provide insight into how character-focused mentoring can challenge traditional power dynamics in mentoring. Mentors fostered youth-adult partnerships through reciprocal exchanges, shared decision making, and joint goal setting, empowering mentees to take the lead and build agency. Collaboration on programme activities and supporting mentee independence, alongside mentors' growing ability to listen more and speak less, created an environment of mutual respect and partnership and seemed to foster children's critical awareness. These practices align with social justice frameworks in mentoring (Hurd, 2024; Liang et al., 2013).

Mentor vulnerability and humility further helped break down hierarchical barriers. The mentors shared personal challenges and learning experiences, which fostered a sense of equality and encouraged mentees to express themselves freely. They conveyed that they were not all-knowing nor there to teach the correct answers but rather learning alongside the mentees. They also sought to empower their mentees to question and disagree with them, teach them things, and take the lead in discussions. Such practices challenge "saviour" mentalities and other paternalistic roots of mentoring (Albright et al., 2017; Hagler et al., 2023; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016) and reflect principles of social justice which advocate for empowering and participatory relationships (Hurd, 2024; Liang et al., 2013).

The findings further challenge traditional hierarchical assumptions by demonstrating that mentors gained as much from the programme as mentees. Both mentors and mentees developed their self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal strengths. This reframes mentoring as a reciprocal learning process rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge from those more to those less knowledgeable, experienced, or privileged. In fact, the balance may even lean toward the mentors, who noted how the programme further enhanced their professional skills, including teamwork, communication, adaptability, and reflective practice, which they saw as particularly useful for their post-university careers. This is important as it challenges the broader narratives and conceptualisations of youth mentoring, seen as an interaction between mentor as giver and mentee as receiver, and may help promote more equitable approaches (Hagler, 2020; Liang et al., 2013; Weiler et al., 2013).

The research also underscores the importance of a mentee-centred approach that views each mentee as a unique individual within a specific context and emphasises their strengths over their deficits. Mentors emphasised the importance of tailoring the programme to mentees' social context. This includes being aware of what is going on in children's lives and what other opportunities for interaction, participation, connection, and engagement they may have in their environment, and considering these in the running of the programme. This aligns with PYD's emphasis on acknowledging multi-layered social influences on development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and supports Schwartz and Rhodes' (2016) framework, which situates mentoring within broader relational ecosystems to enhance support and thriving.

Overall, the findings illustrate three ways in which character-focused mentoring can integrate social justice principles: by challenging power dynamics and hierarchical assumptions to foster partnerships and agency, adopting a mentee-centred approach, and considering contextual factors such as the opportunities and barriers in the mentees' environment in programme design and planning. These are in line with Liang et al. (2013), who put forward five elements of social justice-oriented mentoring relationships which include sharing power, giving voice to young people, engaging in mutual role-modelling, learning by collaborative doing, and addressing systemic barriers to active youth participation. While further efforts are needed to address systemic barriers, these findings offer a step towards moving beyond individual-focused narratives and embracing a socially just approach to character mentoring (Hagler et al., 2023; Hurd, 2024; Kirchgasler, 2018; Walsh, 2017).

5.3.3.3 Embedding character-focused mentoring into relational systems

Finally, the findings suggest several benefits of embedding the programme within mentees' existing relational systems, such as schools, families, and peer networks. First, embedding mentoring in school routines may be linked with improved logistical outcomes such as attendance, as seen by the decline in attendance when this routine was removed in the Covid-19 pandemic. This is consistent with previous research which has found that school-based mentoring (SBM) reduces barriers to participation and ensures greater consistency compared with community-based mentoring (CBM) (Luo & Stoeger, 2023) by allowing mentoring sessions to become part of the mentees' daily schedules. It also reflects PYD's focus on creating contexts that promote an alignment in external conditions for optimal development (Benson & Scales, 2009; Ettekal et al., 2017).

Second, involving families and peers in mentoring created opportunities for deeper mentor-mentee engagement. Family participation in online mentoring, group activities with peers, and the chance to interact with their mentees' friends seemed to provide mentors with insight into their mentees' home lives and peer interactions, allowing them to better understand, relate to, and connect with their mentees. These practices align with Varga and Zaff's (2018) and Schwartz and Rhodes' (2016) frameworks, which emphasise mentoring within webs of support to foster belonging and empowerment.

Third, group activities and peer interactions were seen as enhancing mentee engagement, social learning, and peer relationships, consistent with research on the benefits of group mentoring models (Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014). Playing games with friends made sessions more enjoyable and it was suggested that engaging with their peers in the mentoring helped mentees feel like they are not participating alone, reducing feelings of isolation, making the programme more socially acceptable, and creating a positive peer culture around participation. The mentors noted that peer involvement allowed mentees to compare ideas, share inspiration, and encourage each other, facilitating a supportive and collaborative learning environment. One mentor even observed how this promoted empathy and positive relationships among the mentees. This is consistent with research on blended group mentoring, which combines one-to-one with group mentoring (Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021). Specifically, it is in line with research that has found that the group component contributes to the development of relational skills and that both group and one-on-one mentoring components contribute to self-understanding (Kuperminc, Chan, & Hale, 2018). It also reflects PYD's emphasis on fostering connection and caring (Lerner et al., 2015) and is in line with both Varga and Zaff's (2018) webs of support framework and Schwartz and Rhodes' (2016) PYD model of mentoring, which situate youth development within multi-layered ecologies of relationships that interact with one another to promote youth growth.

Finally, family involvement also created opportunities for connection and growth. Despite initial difficulty with family members joining in sessions, the mentors highlighted the benefits of them gaining insight into their child's relationships with their mentor. One mentor described her mentee's enjoyment at being able to see their parent and their mentee interact and being able to share with them both when they completed a task. This was only briefly touched on but, together with the benefits that came from creating a supportive learning environment with

peers, provides an initial illustration of the benefits of integrating the mentoring programme into youth's broader relational world. The mentor, mentee, and parent playing games together may even have modelled positive adult collaborations for mentees, a key element of the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework and the web of support around a child (Varga & Zaff, 2018). Participation in mentoring sessions also offered parents insight into their child's development and awareness of the character strengths their children were learning about. Future research could explore potential benefits such as strengthened child-parent relationships or increased parent support for character development at home. These would be in line with the PYD hypothesis that aligning youth strengths with external resources promotes thriving (Lerner et al., 2014).

These findings all align with PYD's focus on embedding support within youth's existing relational systems, fostering both individual strengths and supportive environmental conditions (Lerner et al., 2014). By embedding mentoring within schools, peer networks, and families, the programme not only enhanced mentees' internal assets but also optimised their relational ecologies. This holistic, systems-based approach supports Erdem et al.'s (2016) model linking mentoring to PYD outcomes through the cultivation of developmental assets like the Five Cs. Importantly, the results highlight the importance of expanding mentoring beyond a dyadic focus to a holistic, networked approach that leverages the full range of relational supports available to young people (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

5.3.4 Limitations of the research and future research

While the findings of this study offer rich insights into character-focused mentoring from the perspective of mentors, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, self-selection may have led to a bias in the mentor sample. The mentors who agreed to participate and consistently completed the diary entries may have been more engaged or enthusiastic about the programme. This potential bias is further compounded by the fact that two mentors dropped out of the study. While they reported that this was due to time constraints, their experiences, which are not fully captured in the current dataset, may have been more negative or challenging. Future research could address this by incorporating the voices of those who disengaged or withdrew, to better understand obstacles to effective mentoring.

Furthermore, there was considerable variability among participants in how detailed, reflective, and rich their accounts were. While I did my best to balance a variety of views and voices in the analysis and the written account of the themes, several mentors' entries were very short, purely descriptive, or otherwise lacking in depth while several other mentors wrote much longer, more reflective, and interpretative entries, providing richer, more nuanced data. In addition, while it was my aim to complete a post-diary interview with all mentors, not everyone completed this, meaning that nuance may have been lost for those who did not participate in this follow-up, and again they ended up providing less overall data to the dataset. This naturally led the latter voices to be much more prominent in the emergent themes. For example, Veera, Anna, Nina, Nora, and Ava's entries are much more frequently cited than Yaan's, Linn's, or Shuchang's. This likely also reveals a bias in the results, as it may be the case that those who wrote much more were again more engaged or enthusiastic about the programme than the others.

A further possible bias in mentor responses could be due to my own role. Since the participants knew that I would be reading their entries and that I had designed the curriculum and coordinated the programme, their entries may have been unconsciously filtered to align with what they thought I would want to hear. This could be especially pronounced for the six participants who mentored in the groups that I led: Leah, Leila, Nora, Nina, Shuchang, and Veera. Equally, there is a possibility of social desirability bias in the mentors' responses. Since I was the Programme Manager, some responses could have been unconsciously filtered to reflect positively on their own performance. Despite explicit instructions encouraging openness and clarifying that responses would not affect their mentoring role, this power dynamic may still have influenced the content and tone of reflections. Future studies might consider using anonymised or third-party data collection methods to reduce this effect.

Fourth, and related to the above, the data are based solely on mentors' perceptions. This raises the question of how closely their accounts align with their mentees' actual experiences. For example, a mentor may have believed a strong relationship had formed or that a particular strategy was effective, but the mentee may have felt differently. This highlights the importance of capturing both sides of the mentoring relationship in future research, ideally through a dyadic study design that gathers longitudinal data from both mentors and mentees concurrently to compare perspectives and better understand the relational dynamics at play.

Finally, the research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, this provided unique insights, for example into the role of mentoring in a socially constrained environment or the benefits of family involvement, which were analysed separately from the main research question. However, it is also possible that the pandemic context may have affected the results more broadly. While some findings may hold beyond this context, others could be specific to the extraordinary circumstances of that time. Further studies conducted in post-pandemic conditions could examine which insights remain relevant and which were context-dependent. Similarly, there was considerable variety in mentors' experiences in that some mentored only online the entire year, some never mentored online, and some switched between various in-person, hybrid, and online models. While this likely enriched the data, it may also have introduced even more specific factors that affected how they perceived their mentoring relationships and the various mechanisms and elements seen as most important for good mentoring relationships.

Together, these limitations point toward key opportunities for future research, namely to capture the perspectives of mentees and less-engaged mentors, understand the impact of mentoring across diverse implementation contexts, and further validate the identified mechanisms of character development in mentoring using more robust, mixed-methods or longitudinal designs.

Chapter 6 Study 2: Focus groups exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

This focus group study explored children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme. It was guided by the following research question:

How do children aged 9-11 in a character-focused mentoring programme perceive their experiences and its impact on their development?

The primary purpose of the study was to address the thesis's overarching research question from the perspective of children by exploring the meaning they derived from participating. In line with the thesis's subsidiary questions set out in section 4.4, particular attention was given to how children experienced the mentoring relationship and character-focused curriculum, the changes they associated with participation, and the aspects of the programme they perceived as supporting those changes. Study 2 therefore builds on Study 1, which explored these same areas from the mentors' perspective, and further contributes to the youth mentoring, character education, and Positive Youth Development (PYD) literature.

6.1 Method

6.1.1 Participants

Nineteen children aged 9-11 took part, all of whom were pupils attending one of the mentoring programme groups in Glasgow. They lived in areas ranked among the 10% most deprived postcodes in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020). Of 23 initially interested children, 19 returned signed parental consent forms. This was about a third of all eligible children.

In cohort one, eight children participated in two focus groups: four (2 male, 2 female) from one school and four (all female) from another. In cohort two, eleven children participated across three focus groups: three (1 male, 2 female) and four (2 male, 2 female) from a third school, and four (2 male, 2 female) from a fourth. Participants in each of the five focus groups were classmates and knew one another. They were from White Scottish, Bangladeshi, British, Black Other, and Asian Other backgrounds.

6.1.2 Design

A qualitative approach was chosen to centre the voices of participants (Gibson, 2012), providing rich, detailed data on the lived experience of children involved in the mentoring programme. Given the exploratory nature of the study, focus groups were selected as they encourage multiple perspectives and interactive discussion among participants (Wilkinson, 2003). Research suggests that children may feel more comfortable in groups than in one-on-one interviews, which can sometimes support richer and more reflective discussion (Palmer et al., 2010). This is possibly due to the less intimidating environment of a group setting and their familiarity with group discussions in educational contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This was especially relevant here, as the children were part of pre-existing groups within the mentoring programme and were accustomed to group discussion with this group of peers.

Initially, data were collected from cohort one. However, preliminary analysis indicated that the data lacked the depth needed for a reflexive, interpretive approach to thematic analysis. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) argument against rigid notions of data saturation, the goal was not data saturation, but rather to gather rich, textured accounts. To achieve this, three additional focus groups were conducted with children in cohort two, which led to richer data and allowed for more in-depth and nuanced interpretation.

Cohort one participated in the programme under Citywise, which closed in 2023, while cohort two participated under WISE Mentoring, which continued delivering the same character-focused programme in the same communities. Apart from this organisational change, the programme remained the same in structure and content. While most focus groups were conducted in person, one focus group in cohort one was conducted online with children who had primarily taken part in the mentoring programme online.

6.1.3 Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, and permission to approach schools was granted by the Education Services Research Group at Glasgow City Council (Appendices C1 and C2). Consent was also secured from the mentoring organisation (Appendix C3) and from participating primary

schools. Although the study posed minimal risk to participants, the most significant ethical consideration was its inclusion of children aged 9-11. In line with best practice (Lambert & Glacken, 2011), both parental informed consent and child consent/assent were required, respecting parents' protective role as gatekeepers while acknowledging children's capacity to make informed decisions. Information sheets emphasised that participation was completely voluntary and that not taking part would not in any way impact their relationship with the organisation or participation in the mentoring programme. They also explained that data would be securely stored and anonymised, but also highlighted the limits of confidentiality due to the small scale of the organisation and its safeguarding protocols.

Special care was taken to ensure children's informed understanding of the study (Clark, 2011). Child-friendly consent forms were developed using simplified language (Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 5), large text, and illustrations. Children filled in consent forms in advance and the study was again explained verbally before the focus group, where children were reminded that they did not have to take part and that their relationship with the organisation would not be affected if they did not. Verbal assent was only sought when the researcher was confident that the children understood the research and their role in it and showed no hesitation in agreeing to participate.

To address potential power imbalances between an adult researcher and young participants (Morrow & Richards, 1996), several steps were taken (see Appendix C4 for focus group schedule). Each focus group began with an icebreaker activity, including a brief role-reversal exercise where children could ask the researcher questions (Gibson, 2012). Groups were kept small (three or four children) and were composed of peers from the same programme group to encourage ease and openness. An effort was also made to use simple, accessible language throughout (Adler et al., 2019). Children were told they could skip any questions by saying "pass." In order to prevent feelings of pressure to say the right thing, or to say what they thought researchers or staff might want to hear, it was emphasised that there were no right answers and that their honest thoughts would help improve the programme.

To minimise response bias, focus groups were led by an assistant researcher who was not a staff member. Children were also explicitly encouraged to share both positive and negative feedback,

and questions were not repeated, to prevent children from feeling that their first answer was somehow wrong or that they needed to change their response (Adler et al., 2019).

Finally, the safety and wellbeing of participants were respected and prioritised above all else. Safeguarding policies from both the mentoring organisations and the schools ensured that appropriate referral processes were in place in the event of participant distress or a safeguarding-related disclosure.

Access to Study 2 focus group data may be granted by the researcher and/or supervisory team on reasonable request, subject to ethical approval where required, data protection requirements, and an agreement to preserve participant confidentiality. Full transcripts are not publicly available because the data involve children from a small number of schools and programme groups, meaning participants could potentially be recognised from contextual details.

6.1.4 Procedure

6.1.4.1 Data collection procedure

All children who had participated in the programme from its beginning were invited to take part. The study was introduced to children and parents/carers during a session near the end of the year-long programme. Those who expressed interest in taking part received information sheets and consent forms (Appendix C5). Families were encouraged to discuss participation together before completing consent forms. Before each focus group, the study was explained to children again, and their understanding was checked before obtaining verbal assent.

Each focus group began with an icebreaker and time to chat and ask questions to help participants feel at ease. The semi-structured focus groups then focused on the children's experiences of the programme, their relationships with mentors, engagement with the character curriculum, and perceptions of personal growth. Example questions included: "What kind of relationship do you have with your mentor?" and "What have you learnt in Citywise/WISE?" (For a list of all questions, see Appendix C4).

An effort was made to increase children's comfort during the focus groups. They were reminded that they could choose what to share, and the fact that there were no right or wrong answers

was repeated when children disagreed with each other. It was made clear to children that the questions and the study were not about them or their mentor, but about the mentoring programme, and they were encouraged to ask questions at any time if anything was unclear.

6.1.4.2 Data analysis procedure

The focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage framework. This method was chosen primarily for its ability to help researchers make sense of collective meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It was also chosen for its flexibility, as it is less strictly bound to a particular theoretical approach than other qualitative methods and so allows for greater freedom during exploration of the data, accommodating the dynamic nature of focus group interactions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In phase one, I created verbatim transcripts of all initial focus group recordings, anonymised the data using pseudonyms, and reread the transcripts several times to immerse myself in the content and note down early impressions. In phase two, I generated initial codes by annotating the transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, and developing new codes during subsequent readings. I revisited sparsely coded areas to ensure a thorough and inclusive coding process. In phase three, I began clustering codes into broader potential themes, mapping and refining them over time.

During phases four to six, I reviewed and defined themes and subthemes in collaboration with my primary supervisor. Discussions of my original thematic structure revealed that much of my coding was deductive and semantic, often mirroring the curriculum structure. To support a more interpretative analysis, I shifted toward a more inductive, latent approach, re-engaging with the data to uncover underlying assumptions and deeper meanings within participant accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019). This included revisiting children's claims of character growth to explore the subtler ways such development was evidenced or described.

It was at this point that I realised the data lacked the depth and richness necessary to support in-depth, interpretive analysis, likely due to the small number of participants and the fact that some participants, even when prompted, preferred to give short or nonverbal responses rather

than longer, in-depth elaborations. The themes felt underdeveloped, and the accounts did not allow for the complexity and nuance I hoped to explore. This prompted a return to data collection with a second cohort. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) critique of conventional data saturation, this was not about reaching a finite endpoint but about developing a richer dataset that could better support reflective theme development.

I repeated the full six-stage process with the new dataset from cohort two. Once complete, I compared the two sets of themes and integrated them into a unified thematic structure. Reviewing and refining themes also involved considering the entire dataset as well as individual accounts. While for the most part I discussed shared patterns, sometimes I took a narrower approach, such as describing the experience of only one participant. I tried to give an indication of prevalence and alternative views. This final synthesis reflects a broader, more nuanced understanding of children's experiences, accommodating both consistency and variation across the five focus groups.

6.2 Results

The analysis led to two overarching themes and eight subthemes (Table 4). The first theme concerns children's experiences of connection within the programme, including closeness with mentors, personalised support, group belonging, and recreation and play. The second theme concerns perceived growth in self-regulation, self-understanding, and reflection, including children's accounts of managing emotions and behaviour, developing intentionality, building confidence and identity, and understanding character growth as a gradual process. Across themes, children described the programme as relationally supportive and developmentally meaningful, although their accounts varied in depth and reflectiveness.

Table 4

Themes and subthemes from focus groups exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Theme	Subtheme
Connection as a foundation for growth	The role of closeness, friendship, and trust
	Facilitating growth through personalised support
	The benefit of the group context
	The role of recreation and play
Developing self-regulation, self-understanding, and reflection	Learning to manage emotions and behaviour
	Developing intentionality through goal setting and thinking before acting
	Developing personal identity and confidence
	Understanding character growth: a gradual process of self-reflection

6.2.1 Connection as a foundation for growth

The first overarching theme is relational and describes children's interpersonal experiences of participating in the programme and specifically of having a mentor and being in the mentoring group with other children. This theme centred mainly around the role of connection, both with mentors, whom they saw as close sources of support, and with others in the group. This connection was facilitated by recreational bonding and play.

6.2.1.1 The role of closeness, friendship, and trust

One of the most valued aspects of the programme was the close, supportive bonds that children developed with their mentors, in line with most models of mentoring (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Rhodes, 2005). Participants repeatedly emphasised that their favourite part of the

programme was “getting to know my mentor” (Kyle), “bonding with your mentor” (Lucas), and “hanging out with my mentor” (Anasir). They explained that having a mentor meant “there’s somebody there for you” (Tanisha), describing their mentors as “somebody we could trust” (Brittany). They reflected on the strong bonds that they had developed with their mentors, saying that their mentor was “like your best friend” (Kyle), “like your own big sister” (Sara), “like a friend who’s there for me” (Anasir), “like an older sister” (Tanisha), and “probably like a family member but two steps down, because family members are super important, but, like one step more than a best friend” (Lucas). These metaphors indicate the sense of safety and closeness that participants felt with their mentors.

When asked what made them feel so close, Kyle added “I trust them,” suggesting that trust and emotional safety were central to this experience (Rhodes, 2005). Brittany explained that she trusted her mentor in ways she could not trust her peers: “Maybe in class you don’t wanna talk to some of your friends, cause there’s gossips in our class... and you just have [your mentor] to talk to and they won’t tell anybody unless it’s really serious,” highlighting the importance of confidentiality and the significance of the mentors coming from outside the children’s circle of friends. For Sara, the simple act of being heard without interruption was powerful: “It’s really nice to have them to talk to and not interrupting, and they just listen.” She reflected on how most adults in her life were often too busy to listen to her, which made her feel lonely, adding that when you have a mentor, “you’re not alone.” Others described that their mentors provided a safe space which allowed them to express even difficult emotions. As Sebastian said: “if you got angry, you could just tell them what happened, if you got sad you could just tell them what happened.” These words highlight how important it was for participants that the mentors provided them with time and space to share their feelings, especially in the context of a busy world where they may not often get this. Abdullah elaborated on this:

“It’s just like having a friend that you can talk about things that, like, normally you don’t say to anybody else... like something that happened like earlier in the day, like something you felt... it just takes the relief off you... having somebody to talk to... and just taking it off your shoulders.”

In other words, Abdullah appreciated that he could speak about the things he would otherwise not be telling anybody else. This felt like a weight off his shoulders, highlighting how trust and consistent listening allowed participants to unload their worries and feel lighter.

Alongside this safety, participants highlighted the companionship and mutuality that made these relationships feel unique. They appreciated that mentors knew and remembered things about them, such as “my favourite football team, she knows I like sports... she knows a lot about me” (Lucy). They also valued having common interests. For example, Anasir enjoyed talking about shared interests like “foods, different cuisines, places to eat, or just personal opinions like films [...] Things we liked, like games or shopping, things that we both thought were interesting. And it’s like, I had someone who’s like a friend.” These words convey the friend-like qualities, such as common interests, that created a sense of companionship (DuBois et al., 2011; Herrera et al., 2025).

Participants also noted the role of shared identity. Lucas said, “If they like the same things as you, you can get along really well,” while Anasir further reflected on how sharing aspects of identity, such as gender, might shape how closeness develops: “I feel like some people in mentoring could more confide in, like a male... sometimes you might think that if you tell like a girl something that you might get judged.” Even though he valued his female mentor and said that “in mentoring none of that stuff [being judged] happens,” this quote highlights how, even within safe and supportive settings, certain identity-based factors might make it easier for some young people to feel understood, open up, and connect with their mentor. These excerpts also reflect wider discourse in the youth mentoring literature. While some have suggested that sharing demographic characteristics such as race and gender might facilitate stronger relationships (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002), most research finds that other similarities, such as shared interests, may play an even larger role in relationship strength (DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019a).

While many participants developed deep bonds with their mentors, not all described the same level of closeness. Sebastian appreciated being able to speak to his mentor and described her as generally helpful and a “little bit good,” but also said that sometimes “she keeps being nosy.” This suggests that although the mentor showing an interest is important, this can be construed differently depending on the relationship. He also described that he often did not understand her because “she was trying to speak properly to speak English... but she wasn’t doing it very well.” This might reflect differences in style, fewer shared interests, language barriers, the lack of a shared identity, or simply varying preferences for closeness. It demonstrates that not all mentoring relationships developed into deep bonds whilst suggesting that even moderate levels of support were still valued.

Connection and companionship were characterised by a sense of equality. Brittany valued “having a mentor *by our side*,” while Abdullah described it as “having a friend *next to you* that you can talk to” – language that suggests a sense of parity rather than hierarchy. Several participants further described the relationship as mutual, where advice and humour flowed both ways. Brittany reflected, “They could give me advice, I could give them advice... just to relate with each other,” while Anasir emphasised the relaxed respect of the relationship: “If I said a joke, he wouldn't be like you're disrespecting me... he was chill, he was understanding.” This is in line with models of mentoring that promote sharing power and promoting youth-adult partnerships (Liang et al., 2013). The sense of ease and shared enjoyment that came from such partnerships, often built around common interests or humour, made the bonds feel less formal and more like a natural friendship.

Developing this closeness often took time, with many describing early nervousness that gradually shifted into confidence and comfort. When describing how his relationship with his mentor developed, Lucas recalled, “Well we never really knew each other at all but then we started getting along. 1 out of 10 then, and a 10 out of 10 now,” creating his own scale to highlight how much their relationship had grown. Tanisha echoed this: “The first time I met [my mentor] I was so nervous. And now I'm confident.” Small conversations helped move relationships forward. As Brittany said: “It's awkward just in the start. Just sitting with somebody and you're like, ‘hey.’ So, it's better to talk more so you can understand them.” Eventually, relationships became more natural. As Abdullah added: “You'd be, like, serious at the first thing, but if you go on, go on, it's going to be laughing every time,” suggesting a shift in the relationship from a sense of formality to a sense of familiarity and friendliness characterised by laughter.

Finally, the strength of these friendships made endings difficult. Abdullah described it as “quite sad” to say goodbye, saying: “They've been your friend for a while... and yeah, it's just a friend that's gonna leave.” While his primary emotion seemed to be sadness at the thought of saying goodbye, adding that he would miss his mentor after seeing them every week, his framing of the mentor as “a friend that's gonna leave” also hints at an underlying sense of being left behind, suggesting that the ending may have carried not only grief, but also the feeling of being abandoned by a trusted companion. Brittany echoed this sentiment: “Honestly, it's quite sad...

it's somebody we could trust." Some, like Orelie, described abrupt partings: "I didn't get a chance to say, actually, goodbye to my mentor." These comments suggest that the endings of such close relationships, particularly when inadequately planned or supported, may leave children feeling disappointed, unprepared, confused, or even abandoned.

Overall, despite the sadness at endings, participants described their mentors as trusted companions who provided both safety and friendship. The relationships offered time and space for them to share their feelings, a sense of being understood, and the joy of mutual sharing, all of which seemed to make the bond with a mentor one of the children's favourite aspects of the programme.

6.2.1.2 Facilitating growth through personalised support

Alongside experiencing closeness and trust, participants consistently emphasised the ways their mentors actively supported them and helped them learn and grow. They valued that mentors were older and more experienced, which meant they could offer guidance rooted in lived experience. As Brittany explained, "I think it's just better, like, to talk to someone that might understand a bit more because they're older, they've had more life experience." Abdullah similarly highlighted that "they've got experience, like they came from university," while Anasir noted that his mentor's academic journey gave weight to his advice: "[He] went to school also, he's finished all that and now he's in college or university... so we can talk about, like, struggles... academic life, how it was for him... arguments and stuff, and settling disputes properly." These reflections suggest that mentors' age and stage of life helped them provide the children with perspective and relevant advice.

Mentors were also valued as sounding boards for worries and insecurities. Orelie described how conversations with her mentor supported her self-understanding:

"It was great having a mentor to talk to just on your own... about the things you feel, like, insecure and, like, you worry about. Like before, I used to be insecure about lots of things [...] and now I learned about so much. Just talking to her helps me understand more."

Here, Orelie emphasised how her mentor supported her personal growth by helping her make sense of her emotions, understand her thoughts, and overcome her insecurities. Brittany

similarly shared that talking to her mentor eased her day-to-day struggles and supported her personal growth: “Sometimes I would come into school maybe upset and, and when I got to mentoring, I would be really happy because I could talk to [my mentor] about it, and I think she helped me by talking with her.” She concluded, “I think my personality has changed a bit to become more, better,” pointing to ways she had grown generally in her disposition and character as a result of talking to her mentor about her feelings.

Others recalled their mentors’ emotional presence during difficult times: Tanisha shared, “If you're feeling sad you can tell them how you're feeling. And then they will try to help you,” while Brittany reflected on her mentor supporting her after a bereavement: “I was having a really hard time because one of my family members passed away and she helped me through that... She would just talk with me and make sure I'm okay.” These accounts highlight how consistent supportive listening helped participants process their emotions and difficult experiences, suggesting that mentoring may be particularly helpful when children are more insecure or going through something challenging. This is broadly in line with previous findings that youth facing greater environmental or personal difficulties may benefit more from mentoring (e.g., DuBois et al., 2011) and with Rhodes’ developmental model which proposes that mentoring relationships provide emotional security and stress buffering, which matter most when young people are struggling (Rhodes, 2005).

Mentor guidance also extended to practical learning support, particularly around the Wisebook curriculum. Kyle said: “She helps me, like if I'm stuck with something I can't think of for the Wisebook.” Tanisha added: “Like when I'm confused [...] then she just helps me a lot with it.” Lucy and Lucas echoed that their mentors explained difficult questions, with Lucas noting, “You'd talk to your mentor about your answers, and they'd give you suggestions.” Importantly, participants emphasised that mentors did not just give them answers but encouraged deeper thinking. As Sara put it, “She helps me with- if I'm stuck, she doesn't just tell me the answer. She, like, gives me examples and shows me how to do it.” Mentors were therefore seen less as instructors than as guides, making tasks more engaging and supporting reflective thinking.

In addition, mentors helped connect curriculum concepts to everyday life. Brittany described discussing moral scenarios with her mentor: “Like if someone did this to you, what would be the results of that and what could you do,” noting that “it helped” her to work through these

situations. Abdullah explained how conversations with his mentor connected Wisebook lessons to “things that you've done, and how to go through the problems.” In this way, curriculum tasks became starting points for reflection, problem-solving, and personal growth. These reflections are also in line with neo-Aristotelian approaches to character education, which argue that guided discussions of concrete scenarios and real-life dilemmas support growth in character, phronesis, critical thinking, and moral judgement (Kristjánsson, 2015; Nucci, Krettenauer, & Thompson, 2024; Whitlock, 2024).

Finally, mentors adapted their support to individual pupil preferences. Lucas, who did not enjoy writing, shared: “When I say it, she would write it down for me.” Additionally, Sara and her mentor turned learning into games: “We make up our own [game], but at the same time, we're like, learning it as we're doing it.” Melanie preferred active approaches, “like a game sort of, and then it's like you're moving about but it's also teaching you the stuff as well,” while others, like Rua and Yafita, preferred stories or worksheets. These examples show how mentors flexibly tailored activities to make learning enjoyable and accessible for their individual mentee.

Taken together, these accounts show how mentors facilitated growth through personalised support: listening attentively, offering advice grounded in experience, guiding reflection, connecting curriculum topics to real-life scenarios, and adapting learning to children's needs. In doing so, they not only helped children navigate immediate challenges but may also have helped them grow.

6.2.1.3 The benefit of the group context

Beyond one-to-one mentoring, another distinctive aspect of participants' experiences was the importance they placed on the group context. Participants reflected on the value of being part of a wider group with friends, other mentors, and a shared sense of community. They enjoyed coming not just to see the mentors, but also to see their friends. As Lucy explained, “I want to stay at WISE because like you get to see mentors and you can spend time with like your friends and stuff.”

A defining feature of the group was the freedom and flexibility it afforded children. First, it created a context where children could form relationships with mentors naturally. Early on,

children could choose who to work with: “we just had to pick which mentor we have, who we felt naturally together with” (Sebastian). Pairings seemed to form organically, and the group context meant that they could easily be adjusted: “In the first week, we had to choose one random [mentor]... and then the next week, the partners we sat with ended up the ones we were mentors with – unless you swapped” (Brittany). Abdullah elaborated on the possibility of adjusting: “Anasir wanted [my mentor] and I wanted [his mentor], then we swapped.” Second, the group created a context where children could flexibly work with the mentors, with peers or even alone: “If you really, really like your mentor, you can just thank them... and if you don’t like your mentor, you can just choose someone else... or your friends... or even work alone. That’s your choice” (Sebastian). In other words, children moved fluidly between one-to-one time, small-group work with friends, and whole-group activities, meaning that they could seek input, encouragement, and advice from different mentors and peers, depending on their preferences, needs, and what felt comfortable to them.

This adaptable group structure enabled children to interact with mentors beyond their assigned pairs. Anasir noted that his mentor supported not only him, but also “my other mentees, my fellow mentees,” and equally discussed moments when somebody else’s mentor “helped us with... disputes we’d have,” noting that they “wouldn’t have a biased side because they had someone as their mentee. They would actually see the argument from both sides,” highlighting that the mentors were there for all of the children, not just their assigned mentee. Some children even described bonding with other mentors. For example, Abdullah recalled a playful moment with another mentor: “I drew Manuel’s face with a sharp jawline, and now it’s famous. It’s called Manuel Lisa, by Abdullah... I got him to sign it, it’s priceless... now it’s up on his wall.” Brittany, who was involved for two years and whose previous mentor was in the group even though she worked with a new mentor in her second year, also enjoyed the opportunity to “have more fun” and “make more memories” with her previous mentor in a group setting.

Furthermore, some participants even described the group in family-like terms. Sebastian, who sometimes found his mentor “nosy” (see section 6.2.1.1 above), used strongly positive language to describe the group: “We all really like our mentors, it’s like we are brothers and sisters. We would just like to stay here forever... it’s like we’re a family, a family together.” This suggests that the group developed into a cohesive community with a positive group culture, which might have offered some participants, perhaps especially those who found less comfort in the one-to-one relationship, a sense of belonging and safety.

Just like close mentoring relationships made saying goodbye challenging, this strong community spirit similarly made leaving the group difficult. Kyle and Lucas both said their least favourite part of the programme was “leaving Citywise.” Others expressed a desire for the group to continue. “Bring it to high school with us,” said Tanisha. “Yeah!” agreed Lucas. “Citywise in secondary!” added Kyle. Abdullah reflected: “High school’s a big step for you, the climb to high school. If you can have these people with you that go with you throughout... just talking, like, let’s say online, you can go through the things that you just learnt or things that develop.” His use of “these people” rather than just “mentor” highlights the community-based nature of the connection. Overall, these accounts show how the group was more than a backdrop to individual mentoring relationships, but a key part of the mentoring experience. It made the programme more enjoyable, enabled natural pairing, created multiple avenues for support, and facilitated the development of a family-like community.

6.2.1.4 The role of recreation and play

Alongside closeness with mentors and the sense of group community, children emphasised the importance of recreational bonding, fun, laughter, and play. One of the things they highlighted was how much they enjoyed the programme: “Five stars and two thumbs up” (Kyle); “No. Ten stars and three thumbs up” (Lucas) and this was closely tied to recreational experiences, ranging from planned activities, such as trips, to spontaneous, playful interactions.

The children repeatedly emphasised that some of their best memories came from activities such as “cooking, baking and going outside and playing games and just having fun and laughing” (Abdullah). For Bobby, highlights included “the games we played, the jokes we had, the parties, and the trip.” Sebastian described outings with warmth and detail: “we go outside together, we go somewhere together, we’ve been to the zoo together, we have so much fun together, we have snacks, and we play together.” For Anasir, what stood out most from the programme was “the laughs we’d had together” as a whole group. He described spontaneous moments, such as when someone “jokingly put on one of the little costumes... and then everyone just kind of dressed up and we took a photo,” and playful conversations that made the group feel inclusive. For example, he recalled moments when the project leader (who he called a “cheese enthusiast... you know she loves cheese as much as she loves the mentoring”) would begin “friendly debates and nothing too serious,” such as “which cheese is the best.” These memories, which brought

laughter among the participants even as they were remembering them, show how recreational activities and having space for playful interactions outside the curriculum made the programme enjoyable and memorable, which made the children excited about coming and engaging every week. This echoes views that laughter and play create a kind of liminal space that fosters belonging and exploration (Conroy, 2004) as well as prior mentoring research that emphasises the role of humour, joking, and shared fun as key relational processes (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Karcher, 2022).

Beyond making the programme enjoyable, recreational moments also helped deepen children's bonds in the group. Brittany especially appreciated the chance to get to know her mentor and "hang around" with her "somewhere that's not the school." Anasir, describing the experience of "playing a small game like tag or Dodgeball" and "hanging out with my mentor," concluded: "I think it helps us grow closer as friends," showing how recreational activities deepened the closeness the children felt with their mentor. Play may also have strengthened engagement with learning. Brittany, Sebastian, and Stacie all enjoyed "playing a game in the book," while Melanie and Sara created their own games from the curriculum, blurring the line between learning and play. These examples suggest that light-hearted interaction could turn learning into something engaging and collaborative. Together, these accounts suggest that beyond being nice-to-haves, recreation, fun activities, and space for play created an atmosphere of ease and engagement and may have been a key mechanism for connection.

6.2.2 Developing self-regulation, self-understanding, and reflection

The second overarching theme in the results relates to the children's perceptions of the impact of the programme on their growth. The first two subthemes, broadly related to growth in self-regulation, focused on managing emotions and behaviour and on developing intentionality through goal setting and thinking before acting. The final two subthemes, broadly related to growth in self-understanding and reflection, focused on growing in identity and confidence and on increased reflectiveness and recognising their own character growth as an incremental, effortful process. Together, these describe the beginnings of a shift from struggling with impulses or negative thoughts toward more deliberate, reflective action, with children showing an honest awareness of the challenges associated with growth in character and self-regulation and truly grappling with the practical application of the character strengths.

6.2.2.1 *Learning to manage emotions and behaviour*

Participants described the programme as helping them grow in their ability to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviour. As Yafita said: “It teaches you how to stay calm and be resilient.” For many, this meant being able to pause, calm down, and think before reacting. Kyle summed it up: “I can control myself better now.” Improvements in emotional regulation were the most frequently repeated impacts of the programme, with participants mentioning them over twenty times. For example, Rua explained that the mentors “help me not to blow up.” This is consistent with previous evidence that mentoring and social and emotional learning programmes strengthen self-regulation and coping skills (Rhodes, 2005; Durlak et al., 2011) – outcomes that may be increasingly significant as national reports and school surveys note significant setbacks in pupils’ self-regulation and broader social and emotional development following Covid-19 disruptions (Scottish Government, 2023).

Children explained that the programme helped them to handle stress, worries, and negative thoughts. Melanie shared: “You, like, learn about stuff that can help you if you're, like, getting stressed or don't know how to do something,” suggesting that the programme helped her cope with challenges. Sara further explained how she used to be ruled by her emotions, but she had learned ways to “control [her] emotions, and [...] behaviour, and it's better.” Here, both Melanie and Sara emphasise *learning* specific strategies, likely from engaging with the activities in the programme (see section 4.3.2 for an overview and Appendix A for a preview; self-control activities include activities on the fast and slow brain, noticing emotions in the body, identifying emotional triggers, and building strategies for managing feelings). Rua and Tanisha further noted that the programme helped them with handling worries and negative thoughts, and Sara expanded on this further:

“Before, um, if there's a challenge, I can be like, Oh, why does there have to be a challenge? I am so backing out. Like those negative thoughts in my head. [...] But now in resilience, I know how to overcome my negative thought.”

This shift from avoiding negative thinking to resilience in facing and overcoming it marked a meaningful change for Sara. She still had negative thoughts, but these dictated her behaviour less, as she was better able to address them. She also described getting better at learning from mistakes rather than reacting emotionally, saying that, where she once would have “scrunch[ed] this [paper] up and throw[n] it in the bin” after making a mistake, she now paused and reflected.

These comments suggest that participants grew in their ability to confront and learn from challenge and failure rather than avoiding or reacting negatively to difficulty. This indicates not only increased emotional resilience, but also a mindset that supports wellbeing and learning from setbacks.

Participants gave several examples of how they were applying strategies they had learnt, which included “breathing in and breathing out,” (Abdullah), thinking about “the consequences” (Sara), and even turning to “friends that you could talk to” (Abdullah), beyond the programme. For example, Bobby explained how she was now able to handle difficult situations at home with her brother:

“[I developed] self-control cos my brother, like, has problems and it causes him to lash out and, like, attack me sometimes. And it made me like, not fight back, and it made me like, try and calm down myself before I do anything. [...] to think twice before doing it.”

In these words, Bobby explains how what she had learned in the programme helped her respond in real-life high-emotion situations. The focus on pausing, calming down, and thinking aligns with contemporary models of emotion regulation and impulse control that emphasise pausing and reappraisal (Barkley & Benton, 2021; Gross, 2015). Bobby’s example also highlights how growth in emotional and behavioural regulation was applied beyond the mentoring space. Together with the rest of this subtheme, this example illustrates the ways in which participants perceived the programme as helping them take steps towards better managing their emotions and behaviour.

6.2.2.2 Developing intentionality through goal setting and thinking before acting

Participants also described how the programme helped them become more intentional in their lives, moving from passively “going on” to actively planning, reflecting, and taking purposeful steps. Two aspects stood out: setting meaningful goals and learning to pause and think before acting. Together, these point to the development of personal agency, or the sense of being able to shape one’s actions and future rather than simply reacting to circumstances.

Goal setting was frequently mentioned as one of the programme’s most valuable outcomes. Tanisha explained that mentoring taught her to “set your goals, like what you want to do,” while

Kyle said that the programme helped him think about his life goals and steps to get there: “Complete Primary School. Complete Secondary School. College.” Brittany highlighted the role of mentoring in making her goals more concrete and structured: “You make sure it's more organised, so you know what the thing is you're wanting,” even applying this process to her aspiration of one day starting a business. Reflecting on conversations with her mentor about how to overcome obstacles while pursuing goals, Sara noted: “Now I can set my goals and overcome obstacles that come my way.”

Abdullah described working with his mentor to identify personal priorities and create a morning routine: “We talked with my mentor about things that I wanted to do.” This resulted in practical steps such as setting timers to improve his focus “instead of like waking up and being tired.” He also recognised that building habits takes time: “It takes a long time for a routine to be good for you, like it takes a month... if you miss a day, it might take a bit longer.” The focus on setting goals, taking consistent steps towards them, and monitoring progress aligns with contemporary accounts of self-control which go beyond seeing this purely as the effortful inhibition of impulses to defining it more broadly, as the effortful process of aligning actions and habits with long-term goals (Fujita, 2011; Hennecke & Bürgler, 2023; Werner & Ford, 2023). It also reflects a growing awareness that the successful pursuit of goals requires time, effort, and consistency and a growing ability to apply goal-setting strategies to both long-term ambitions and daily routines.

Equally important was the shift from reactive to more thoughtful decision-making, also aligned with conceptualisations that see self-control as acting in a manner consistent with one's goals and values (Fujita, 2011). Melanie shared: “You learn how to, if someone says something, you don't take action straight away, you think about it first.” The focus on pausing and thinking aligns not only with contemporary models of self-regulation (Gross, 2015), but also with traditional models of character education which frame the act of pausing not as a delay per se, but as an act of deliberation and judgement prior to choosing a fitting course of action (Arthur et al., 2015). Others echoed this change. Contrasting her previous mindset with what she had learned, Sara said: “Back then I could not understand the consequences [...] But then, I know the consequences. And I understand my decision making.” These words convey a growing awareness of cause and effect, and the value of pausing to reflect before acting. Briya elaborated on this:

“In the book, there’s different stages, like resilience, there’s growth mindset, fairness... Before the Wisebook... I never thought anything of that... But then when you, like, learn a bit more you actually *think* instead of, like, just going on.”

In these words, Briya describes how learning about topics in the curriculum made her “actually think” about concepts that she had never thought about before. She links this to a shift from autopilot, “just going on” behaviour to greater thoughtfulness. This emphasis on thought as a way of taking control again aligns with developmental work on effortful control in late childhood (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010) and builds on classical psychological literature (e.g., James’ (1899) famous comment that “*to think*, in short, is the secret of will” (p. 187)). Briya further provided a few examples of how this thinking plays out in a classroom. For example, referencing the fairness topic, she explained how she realised that “if one person has an advantage and the other not... one would be fine and the other wouldn’t,” which might mean that they need different levels of help. This learned ability to consider these new concepts and link them to real-life situations enabled her to gain new perspective and be more deliberate and intentional in her everyday actions, choices, and practices.

Other participants also began applying what they’d learned in ways that extended beyond the programme’s curriculum. While their reflections often echoed the language of the curriculum and the character strengths, such as self-control, resilience, and good judgement, they also demonstrated an ability to transfer these to new contexts, showing growing agency in navigating new situations. For example, Hina said that discussing “the good judgement bit” of the curriculum helped her “put [herself] in someone else’s shoes” while Yafita said that she learned “how to be confident, how to be calm” and stated that participation in the programme would help her to transition to secondary school because she had learned “how to mix with others,” applying her skills to friendships in a way that went beyond the explicit framing of the curriculum. Sara similarly added: “So when you came to Citywise you’d be like, oh, I have no idea how to make friends... but after Citywise, you’ll be like... I will help others,” suggesting that she was now better able to positively engage with others. These accounts add to a wider pattern of real-life application already mentioned, from managing conflict at home, through building morning routines, to planning for the future. Together, they show how participants were integrating character strengths into their daily lives, developing greater self-awareness, self-control, intentionality, and agency.

Overall, these reflections suggest that participants were developing intentionality and self-control by clarifying goals, creating practical strategies for achieving these, and learning to pause, exercise judgement, and consider consequences before acting. This combination of planning and reflective decision-making points to a shift from passivity toward intentionality, helping children take greater ownership of their lives and futures.

6.2.2.3 Developing personal identity and confidence

Some participants also discussed how the programme affected their personal identity. For example, Briya shared how the programme helped her to be her own person: “It just teaches you how to be like your own self. And instead of like trying to fit in you just be like, instead of trying to be a different person, it's like you can be [you].” This suggests that the programme developed Briya’s self-awareness and capacity to think about who she is, as well as a stronger sense of self. It gave her the security and confidence to know that she does not have to “fit in” inauthentically but can be herself.

Sara described this process as one of discovering her inner strengths and gaining confidence to speak about who she is. She shared that she thought the aim of the programme was “so we can know about our inner strength” and “to be, like, more confident. Yeah. I think that's what Citywise is for. I mean, that's what made me confident.” Her reflections suggest that mentoring was not just about skill-building, but about fostering a more positive and secure sense of self. She contrasted her uncertainty about herself at the start of the programme with how she felt at the end:

“In the beginning, we didn't know much, but after Citywise, we learnt all about ourselves... Before Citywise, if anybody asked me who I am, I'd be like, hm... [but now], you know, I can say lots. [...] Now I feel really proud of myself.”

Sara’s words highlight how the programme appeared to support a more positive, confident, and coherent sense of identity, even suggesting that the purpose of the mentoring programme is building inner strengths and confidence. She presents the programme as helping participants not only understand themselves better, but also feel proud and secure in who they are.

The theme of increased confidence was echoed by others. Bobby described WISE as a space to “grow your self-confidence,” while Tanisha said: “It makes you feel confident.” Yafita shared

that she learned “how to be confident,” and Hina explained that the mentors “help you get confident.” Similarly, Orelie shared that the aim of WISE was “to make you confident,” adding, “[my mentor] supported me with my confidence and my insecurities.”

Together, these reflections indicate that participants not only grew in self-awareness but also developed a deeper sense of self-assurance, describing themselves as more themselves, more secure, and more confident in expressing who they are. These findings align with previous research which has found mentoring to increase children’s self-esteem, sense of self, and belonging (Karcher, 2005; Raposa et al., 2019b) and with the identity pathway in Rhodes’ developmental model, which links mentoring to an increased sense of self (DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2005).

6.2.2.4 Understanding character growth: a gradual process of self-reflection

Participants also engaged in thoughtful reflection about the challenges of practising self-control and the gradual nature of character growth. While many felt they had improved, they also acknowledged that growth was ongoing and difficult, especially when strong emotions were involved. Their words suggested honest self-reflection and humility as well as a mature awareness that character development takes time, effort, and persistence.

Self-control was often described as the hardest strength to practise (see also Fujita, 2011). Kyle noted that “self-control was hard” because it involved going against what you want in the moment (e.g., “I really wanted that cake”). Rua admitted that the most difficult part of the programme was: “self-control, cos I still can’t control myself.” Her words reveal not just the difficulty associated with practising self-control, but a willingness to acknowledge her own limitations. Melanie gave a vivid account of how difficult it was to apply self-control in the heat of the moment:

“I was trying to do self-control today, but I just- I couldn't. [...] I feel like when you're angry or feeling emotion, you don't really think about self-control. Everything just like, just leaves. You just want to be angry, and... you just don't want to think about anything, you don't want to be, like, self-controlled.”

Her words illustrate how knowledge of strategies does not always translate into practice, especially when anger takes over. Not only did she forget the strategies in the moment, but she

also admitted not wanting to use them. While for her this was a source of frustration and led her to question whether she was truly growing, it also reveals meaningful engagement with the process of growth in self-regulation and a grappling with the real-life challenge of applying it, showing a deeper understanding of its relevance and difficulty.

Others offered similarly honest reflections. Brittany admitted: “Sometimes I just want to hit some people in the face, but now I’m working on that and trying not to.” While she acknowledges her ongoing struggles associated with growth in self-regulation, the words “working on that” suggest that she is trying to grow in this area. This suggests that while participants did see themselves growing, they did not stop at triumphant claims of mastering self-control. Instead, they were open about limitations and the difficulty of change, and they articulated intentions to keep working on it, demonstrating meaningful engagement with the *process* of development, not just its outcomes.

Some participants framed this process as gradual and step-by-step, reflecting an awareness that character development takes time and persistence. Kyle compared it to “levelling up” in a game: “I don’t know how to say this, but [...] like, basically, like, levelling up with things like self-control, good judgement and goal setting and stuff like that.” Rather than describing a sudden change or claiming he lacked these strengths before and gained them after, he described *gradually* improving, showing an awareness that character growth is an iterative and incremental process requiring ongoing effort. Lucas further offered a concrete example of this slow but meaningful progress:

“Before Citywise, say I was losing in a game, I probably would have thrown a pillow at the telly or the window and probably broke something, but after Citywise, I’ll throw it in the opposite direction.”

He elaborated on this, saying that he is learning to “take time” when he gets “fired up” and that on occasion he might even “get the controller, hold it, close the game, and slowly turn the PlayStation off” when he gets upset while losing a game. These words highlight small but real efforts to channel anger more constructively, again showing reflectiveness, honesty, and humility, and illustrating that growth may look not like perfection but like small, positive steps that can over time add up to greater change.

Overall, these reflections show that participants were not just learning about character, but actively grappling with how to apply it. They recognised that growth, particularly around self-control, is difficult and sometimes frustrating, but also that progress, even in small steps, matters. In their willingness to reflect honestly, acknowledge challenges, and keep working at it, participants demonstrated humility, self-awareness, and commitment, which may themselves be essential foundations of development.

6.3 Discussion

This study explored children's experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and how they perceived it as affecting their development. Findings clustered around two overarching themes, each comprising four subthemes. The first theme highlighted connection with others as a foundation for growth. Children valued being able to talk about their feelings and being listened to, and many developed close, trusting bonds with mentors, often described as "like a best friend" or "an older sister." They also appreciated mentors' guidance and personalised support, the sense of community within the broader group, and shared recreation, games, and laughter, which together made the programme enjoyable and emotionally safe.

The second theme centred on developing self-regulation, self-understanding, and reflection. Children described learning to manage emotions and behaviour (calming down, reframing negative thoughts, seeking support), developing intentionality (setting goals, thinking before acting, taking ownership), and growing in self-awareness, identity, and confidence. They also engaged in honest reflection about the slow, effortful nature of character growth especially in relation to self-control, acknowledging the difficulty associated with practising this and their own limitations and slow progress.

In the discussion that follows, I consider: (1) the benefits and risks of relational closeness, including questions of boundaries and planned closure; (2) the added value of the group context in blended mentoring formats and how peer processes, belonging, and shared recreation may scaffold growth; and (3) the prominence of self-awareness and honest reflection in children's accounts, proposing these as potential drivers of growth and outlining implications for how character development is measured and evaluated.

6.3.1 The role of closeness and the challenge of boundaries in youth mentoring

First, the findings highlight the depth of relational closeness that participants felt with their mentors. This is important as closer mentoring relationships are consistently linked to more positive social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes (Silke et al., 2019; Spencer, Drew, & Gowdy, 2023). The emphasis that children placed on close bonds also aligns with Rhodes' (2005) developmental model of youth mentoring and with Positive Youth Development's (PYD) emphasis on connection as foundational to healthy development (Lerner et al., 2005).

In line with previous literature (Griffith & Larson, 2016), these emotional benefits seemed to rest on trust and perceived mutuality. First, the analysis showed that children stressed the value of uninterrupted listening, confidentiality, and relief at "getting things off their shoulders" and described mentors as "somebody there for you" and "somebody we could trust." This helped them feel comfortable to discuss worries, insecurities, and even difficult life events with their mentor. This echoes wider findings that trust, empathy, understanding, and emotional safety are foundational to effective mentoring (Donlan et al., 2017; Griffith & Larson, 2016; Pryce, 2012) and that warm, responsive adults can help young people regulate emotions and buffer them from stress (Larsson et al., 2016; REACH, 2019).

Second, the children valued reciprocity, shared interests, an ability to "relate with each other," and a dynamic where the mentor was not the expert giving answers but invited two-way conversations (e.g., "They could give me advice, I could give them advice"). Prior work frames this as mutuality, or a non-hierarchical, collaborative stance that supports deeper emotional growth and self-understanding (Lester et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2002; Spencer, 2006b). For example, the mentor engaging in a two-way conversation rather than answering questions for the mentee helps mentees think more deeply and understand themselves better (Larsson et al., 2016). In practice, fostering this mutuality begins with how pairs are formed. Previous work has found that matching mentoring pairs on shared interests (and, where appropriate, identity factors) predicts earlier comfort and stronger, longer-lasting relationships, making a two-way rhythm more likely (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Raposa et al., 2019a; Spencer, 2006b). Children in the current study quickly identified shared interests (e.g., foods, films, games) as catalysts of mutuality, and suggested that while it may be a preference for some, shared identity may not be a requirement. They also highlighted the importance of youth choice within a multi-mentor setting, which allowed them to gravitate towards natural fits (see next section for more

discussion about this). Importantly, attempts at mutuality may not always be welcome and what reads as caring interest to one child can feel “nosy” and intrusive to another, suggesting a need for mentors to be attuned, i.e., read cues, be responsive, and calibrate how much to share, ask, and probe in an autonomy-supportive rather than controlling way (Pryce, 2012).

Still, the findings that emphasise the depth of emotional closeness in mentoring relationships also invite a more critical reflection. The evocative language participants used, describing their mentors as their “older sister” or “one step more than a best friend,” raises questions about emotional dependency, blurred boundaries, and unmet expectations when relationships inevitably end once the programme is complete. Previous research cautions that closeness may result in emotional distress and feelings of abandonment when the relationship ends (Keller et al., 2025; Larsson et al., 2016; Rhodes, 2020; Varga & Zaff, 2018), a concern echoed by participants in the current study who found endings painful.

Mentoring relationships are generally considered less formal and closer to friendships than professional caring relationships. Some have even defined them as “a consistent, caring relationship that transcends professional boundaries” (Philip, 2008, p. 19). They have also been characterised as being somewhat *personal* rather than purely *professional* (Barrowclough & White, 2011) and as occupying a niche “somewhere between professional and kin” (Rhodes et al., 2009), characterised by a more natural connection. Alongside trust and mutuality, a natural connection that goes beyond professional boundaries may be tied to the presence of laughter, spontaneity, and play; qualities which participants in this study repeatedly associated with comfort and ease and which successful mentoring relationships have been found to embrace (Javornicky Brumovska & Seidlova Malkova, 2023; Philip, 2008; Spencer, 2006b). Perhaps even more importantly, mentoring relationships have been found to permit greater authenticity than professional relationships. This does not license breaches of ethical or safeguarding boundaries (Barnett, 2008), but rather it allows for relationships that are more personal, authentic, vulnerable, and mutually engaged (Liang et al., 2002). Indeed, individuals in professional caring roles (such as counsellors) who also offer mentorship have noted that they allow themselves to be more authentic, open, and vulnerable in their mentoring relationships in comparison to the more reserved stances they take in their professional roles (Spencer, 2006b).

Therefore, being informal, authentic, genuine, fun, and spontaneous may be precisely what promotes trust, mutuality, and growth in the mentoring relationship (Lester et al., 2019; Spencer & Rhodes, 2014). In fact, because adolescents and pre-adolescents are acutely sensitive to whether adults are being genuine, the presence or absence of these characteristics may be either a major catalyst or a major barrier to closeness and growth (Yu et al., 2018). However, this very informality may blur the line between friend and mentor, which is a line that both mentees and mentors often find difficult to navigate (Philip & Spratt, 2007), although mentors in the current mentor diary did not explicitly discuss this. Traditional ways to manage this usually emphasise structural safeguards such as third-party engagement and recourse, clarity about roles, expectations, and the scope and duration of the relationship, and early preparation for closure. While these are essential, they may not fully address the more subtle relational dynamics that arise when relationships feel intensely personal, mutual, and friend-like.

A possible way forward, to maximise the benefits of this relational authenticity and minimise the challenges associated with this closeness, is to draw more explicitly on Positive Youth Development (PYD) and ecological systems perspectives. This includes the mentor being aware that they are entering a child's existing web of relationships, and that young people thrive when supported by a constellation of ties with varying levels of closeness which together meet their developmental needs (Varga & Zaff, 2018). What any one child needs from mentoring therefore depends on their current supports and greater closeness may be more impactful for some, but not for others (Lester et al., 2019). Drawing on PYD also includes recognising each young person as an individual with unique needs, histories, and vulnerabilities. One aspect of this which may shape the mentoring experience is a child's attachment history. For children with insecure or fragmented relationship histories, a mentor may become a secondary or in some cases even a primary attachment figure (Zilberstein, 2008; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). In such cases, closeness, trust, consistency, and authenticity may be precisely what fosters a more secure working model of relationships (Austin et al., 2020; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). Yet these are also the cases that call for heightened caution, as prior relational turbulence may increase vulnerability to dependence, blurred boundaries, unreasonable expectations, inappropriate bonding, fear of abandonment, and distress at endings (Kanchewa et al., 2018).

In these cases, mentors may benefit from practising what Jordan (1999) terms "anticipatory empathy," or remaining genuine and emotionally present while holding in mind how their

actions, disclosures, and relational style might affect their mentee. This anticipatory empathy is what Spencer (2006b) suggests distinguishes adult-child mutuality from adult-adult mutuality, because it carries an additional responsibility, which is that the mentor's openness should be guided by the young person's developmental needs rather than the mentor's own needs. Pryce (2012) similarly observed that highly attuned mentors described their relationships as mutual, but this mutuality was driven by their interest in the young person and their needs and preferences, not by an expectation of reciprocity. This distinction highlights how mentor-mentee mutuality is asymmetrical in that it may feel like a friendship to the child, but the mentor remains responsible for ensuring that the relationship serves the mentee's growth.

Several considerations and PYD principles may inform this anticipatory empathy. The first is an awareness of the child's as well as the mentor's own relational history, since both have been found to affect the quality of the mentoring relationship, shaping how trust, closeness, and boundaries are navigated over time (Larose et al., 2019). The second involves the mentor acting with awareness that their presence in the child's ecology is time-limited and using this window to strengthen the child's developmental assets and engagement with the wider world rather than fostering an unhealthy dependency (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2013). Practically, this may involve building mentees' social skills and perspective-taking, modelling two-way interactions, and intentionally helping the mentee to strengthen their relationships with peers, parents, and teachers, which is indeed an outcome frequently observed in mentoring evaluations (Austin et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2013; DuBois et al., 2011). In group-delivered programmes like the current one, this may also include a deliberate focus on facilitating group belonging and peer relationships.

These principles may be especially important at closure. Previous research has found that endings are central to the impact of mentoring as they can either consolidate growth and trust in relationships or elicit feelings of abandonment and ultimately cause more harm than benefit (Herrera et al., 2011). One way of approaching endings is to be clear from the outset about both the timeframe and the goals of the mentoring relationship. If one of these is a strengthened web of support around the child, the mentor can actively help the child approach other adults in their lives or encourage them to continue a conversation with somebody in their network, thereby decreasing dependence on the one relationship by using it to model positive interactions and increase interdependence with others around them (Lester et al., 2019). Endings should also be

planned and signposted so that children, especially those who are most vulnerable and most closely attached, have time to prepare and say goodbye (The National Mentoring Resource Center, 2021; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). Simple structures such as making clear where in the sequence of topics each session is situated or how many sessions are left may help children map their progress and the time they have left with their mentor.

Endings should also be process-oriented and growth-promoting (Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). First, mentors should ensure children have the space to express their feelings, reflect on what the relationship has meant to them, and review joint goals and achievements. Second, they should try to end with an awareness of the contribution of the relationship to children's lives and futures. Research has found that when done well, endings can help children feel valued, foster secure working models, and model healthy separation, equipping young people with tools to cope with future transitions (Knox et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2017). The exact approach should again be tailored to each child's needs and attachment patterns as some may need more support than others to frame the ending positively (Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). For example, an anxious child may especially benefit from hearing directly from their mentor what they learned from the child and the relationship, and what they will carry forward into other relationships, affirming the value of the relationship to both (The National Mentoring Resource Center, 2021).

Overall, these perspectives suggest that the challenges of closeness and boundaries in youth mentoring are not best resolved by limiting warmth or discouraging informality. Rather, they call for programme design and mentor training grounded in PYD and ecological theories, situating the dyad within a wider web of support, recognising the unique histories and vulnerabilities that young people bring, practising anticipatory empathy, and ensuring planned, sensitive closure. Such approaches might preserve the transformative potential of close, authentic mentoring while protecting young people from the risks that can accompany it.

6.3.2 The role of group dynamics, flexibility, and facilitation in blended mentoring

Another prominent finding was the value children placed on interactions within the programme beyond their mentor, such as time with friends, with other mentors, and with the group as a whole. This is important because even though much of the mentoring literature has focused on the dyad, there is growing consensus that embedding mentoring within children's broader social

ecologies, for example through group and blended formats, can extend its reach and improve outcomes (Keller, 2005a; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

First, children enjoyed taking part alongside their friends. Previous research suggests that participation in extracurricular activities with friends (over and above participation alone) is linked to stronger engagement (Knifsend et al., 2018) and strengthens peer connectedness (Center for Supportive Schools, 2025; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021). This reflects a core strength of blended mentoring, which is that it balances “vertical” relationships with more knowledgeable mentors and “horizontal” peer relationships (Hartup, 1989). In other words, children can receive tailored guidance and modelling within the dyad while practising and consolidating skills and developing a sense of belonging among peers (Kuperminc, Chan, & Hale, 2018). This blended approach also aligns with PYD’s emphasis on the importance of caring adults, of integrating youth’s existing networks into programmes, and of the developmental salience of peer relationships in late childhood (Lerner et al., 2005).

Second, the blended format appeared to broaden access to supportive adults and to cultivate a positive group culture. Children could work alongside friends and other pairs and, because pairs were not fixed at the outset, could choose and switch mentors early on. Several children described bonding not only with their own mentor but also with other mentors and they noted moments when non-assigned mentors helped resolve “friendly disputes” by seeing things from both sides. Such accounts suggest a wider pool of adult perspectives and more opportunities for interactions with caring adults who may, in PYD terms, act as developmental assets, enabling more tailored fits to children’s needs (Huizing, 2012; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021; Lerner et al., 2005).

Participant descriptions of inside jokes, spontaneous play, and collaborative problem-solving further point to a cohesive group climate in which children felt at ease. One participant even compared the group to “a family.” Notably, this participant seemed less close with his assigned mentor than most, echoing suggestions that a group may offer a more comfortable setting for children who are less at ease in one-to-one interactions (Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014). Previous research has also identified group cohesion and belonging as social processes through which group and blended formats produce positive outcomes (Dowd et al., 2015; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021; Sánchez et al., 2018). Although participants here did not always explicitly link their growth to specific group processes, previous work suggests that the group element of

blended mentoring programmes fosters social interaction and mutual support and that belonging, safety, and cohesion help establish positive norms, reinforce goals, build internal resilience, and enable reciprocal support (Deutsch et al., 2017; Kuperminc et al., 2018; Kupersmidt et al., 2020).

A key contribution of this study to knowledge and practice in the field of blended mentoring is its emphasis on youth choice and flexible configuration. Children valued being able to “pick which mentor we have” based on who they “felt naturally together with,” and to move flexibly between one-to-one time, small groups with friends, and whole-group activities. Theoretically, this may embody PYD’s emphasis on agency and person-context fit (Tolan et al., 2016). Empirically, flexibility in group configuration appeared especially helpful when a dyad felt less close; instead of the relationship collapsing, as often happens in traditional one-to-one formats when relationships falter, mentees could work alongside a friend or in a small group and still access input and growth-promoting conversations. This extends previous suggestions that blended formats provide networked support when an individual relationship faces obstacles (Griffith et al., 2019). Practically, while youth “voice and choice” are broadly recommended in mentoring (Keller et al., 2026; Spencer et al., 2019), and recent research has found stronger effects when youth choose their mentors (Koper et al., 2025), choice over relationship configuration in blended mentoring (including mentor selection and the balance of one-to-one versus small-group work) has not been discussed in previous research. These findings therefore highlight configuration choice both as an applied expression of PYD’s principles of agency and person-context fit and as a possible driver of engagement and continuity.

An emphasis on choice and flexible configuration in blended and group mentoring raises practical questions for future work to examine, such as how best to ensure that flexibility does not devolve into chaos. This relates to an ongoing debate about potential negative peer influence in group formats. Although some have raised questions about risks such as deviancy training, exclusion, co-rumination, breaches of confidentiality, or dominance by a few voices (Garringer et al., 2017), evidence for these risks is limited (Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021) and the current accounts also found no evidence for them. On the contrary, many studies find that mentees in blended or group programmes become more open with one another, offer encouragement and advice, and help peers grow (Deutsch, Reitz-Krueger, Molloy, & Varga, 2013; Griffith et al.,

2019); parallel findings from group psychotherapy suggest that peer processes can inspire hope, deepen self-understanding, and enhance coping (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

A likely precondition of this, which may also be essential for successfully implementing youth agency and flexibility, is skilled facilitation (Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021). This involves balancing structure with responsiveness, managing conflict, and ensuring that humour and flexibility remain contained and constructive (Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014). In the current programme, much of this facilitation was done by a project leader, who coordinated mentor-mentee pairing, oversaw sessions, enabled youth freedom and flexibility, and balanced group discussion of curriculum topics with space for facilitated play, shared games, trips, snacks, and joking. Alongside youth choice, space for appropriately scaffolded playful, low-stakes interactions with mentors and project leaders (“the games,” “the jokes,” “the trip,” “cooking, baking,” “tag or dodgeball”) seemed to function as social glue, making relationships feel natural and helping the group “grow closer as friends,” which then made it easier for the group to engage in learning and growth. This extends findings on the role of shared recreation in dyadic mentoring (Austin et al., 2020; Dallos & Myhill, 2025; Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Spencer, 2006b) to a blended format, where a facilitated balance of structure, play, and flexibility may have helped build collective identity and sustain engagement, consistent with guidance that well-facilitated processes can establish a climate that supports growth (Kuperminc et al., 2020).

Together, these findings suggest that while the blended format may create a context for deeper interaction and growth, as suggested by previous research, the added value of this model may lie in the well-facilitated balance of vertical and horizontal relationships, multiple mentoring ties, and scaffolded play, coupled with the flexibility and youth choice that allow support to be tailored to individual needs. This aligns with PYD’s commitment to agency and person-context fit, and points to questions for future work to examine, such as identifying when, for whom, and how configuration choice is most beneficial, and exploring how facilitation can best convert flexibility into cohesion and growth.

6.3.3 Self-awareness, reflection, and the measurement of character growth

A final noteworthy pattern in the findings was the prominence of self-awareness and nuanced reflection in participant accounts. Rather than stopping at confident claims of acquired virtues, children described grappling with what these virtues look like in practice alongside an

increasing ability to understand themselves better, monitor and control their impulses, recognise their own limitations, and take small, incremental steps grounded in real life. Two features seemed to underpin this change: honest self-awareness and a more general reflectiveness and intentionality.

First, children showed self-awareness through learning to understand themselves better, identify their strengths, and develop a stronger sense of self, alongside acknowledging their limitations and the need for personal growth, often around self-control. This aligns with literatures that place self-awareness at the start of wider personal, social, and moral development. Self-awareness is the first competency in social-emotional learning (SEL) models, with some even suggesting that all other SEL competencies, including self-regulation, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, flow from it (CASEL, 2013; Elias et al., 2014; Zakrzewski, 2021). There is also evidence that as self-understanding and inner reflection grow, the brain develops and strengthens the neural networks that enable an awareness of others' perspectives, thoughts, and feelings (Siegel, 2010). In line with current findings on learning to manage emotions and behaviour and developing intentionality through goal setting and thinking before acting, self-awareness has further been found to increase self-regulation, realistic goal setting, ethical adherence, and agency (Astuti & Rozikin, 2024; Sibarani, 2024). Similarly, in line with current findings on the effect of the programme on children's personal identity and confidence, self-awareness has also been linked to the integration of one's character, to greater security in one's sense of self, and to improved mental health and wellbeing (Rowe, 2023), and is even treated as foundational to holistic development in existential and humanistic psychology (Wong, 2006).

One aspect of self-awareness that especially stood out in the results was participants' ability to acknowledge where they were struggling. Several admitted that they struggled with anger and noted moments when they "didn't want" to use strategies even when they knew they should while still committing to "working on" or "levelling up" their character. Classic work on self-regulated learning shows that accurate appraisals of one's limitations can improve performance and that while this alone may not suffice for change to occur, it creates a readiness for change that may be strengthened by an intention to grow (Nilson & Zimmerman, 2023; Shapiro, 1984; Zimmerman, 2002). Behaviour-change theory similarly suggests that movement from the first stage of change (pre-contemplation) to the second stage of change (contemplation) requires

awareness and acknowledgement of a problem (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997; Raihan & Cogburn, 2023). Finally, beyond simply being a starting point for growth, participants' ability to engage in honest reflection on their limitations may in itself be a virtue in practice. Specifically, it may be an enactment of humility and honesty, which relate to accurate and truthful self-appraisals, and which are included in the VIA Classification of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue's (JCCV) framework of moral virtues (JCCV, 2017).

Second, many accounts reflected a broader reflectiveness that may underpin and integrate other areas of growth described in the results. Children reported increased thoughtfulness in managing their behaviour, such as thinking before acting and considering consequences of their actions (Arthur et al., 2015; Gross, 2015), they became more intentional about goals, breaking them down, monitoring progress, and creating plans to overcome obstacles (Fujita, 2011; Werner & Ford, 2023), and they reflected more deeply about their own identities and about the nature of character growth. One interpretation of these findings is that they are an indication of increased self-control, which includes processes by which individuals control their impulses, actions, and habits in the service of long-term goals (Fujita, 2011; Hennecke & Bürgler, 2023; Werner & Ford, 2023).

A broader interpretation is that these findings indicate increased metacognition, defined as the evaluation and regulation of one's thinking, emotions, and behaviour in pursuit of goals. This encompasses self-awareness, reflection, monitoring, strategic goal management, agency, and self-control (Chauveron et al., 2015; Hennecke & Bürgler, 2023). Metacognition has been framed as a superordinate capacity at the heart of youth flourishing (Fadel, 2015; Sale, 2020) and has been found to increase task completion, achievement, self-regulated learning, physical and mental health, functioning, and independent decision-making (Crum et al., 2023; De Boer et al., 2018; Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007; Penney et al., 2022; Zimmerman, 2002). While children in the current study did not discuss the specific mechanisms behind their perceived growth, they reported learning to manage their emotions, overcome negative thoughts, cope with stress, better control their behaviour, and engage in more intentional more, all of which may point to increased metacognitive thinking.

From a traditional Aristotelian character education perspective, these findings may also be interpreted as early expressions of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), seen as an integrating meta-virtue. They map onto *phronesis*' components: children showed discernment of when they needed to "think twice" because a strength may be needed (constitutive component), sought to align their goals with their values and identity (blueprint component), attempted to regulate emotion through emotional reflexivity (emotional-regulative component), and brought strengths together in specific situations (integrative component) (JCCV, 2017; Kristjánsson et al., 2021). These findings could equally be an enactment of the virtues of prudence, judgement, and perspective, which are again included in the VIA Classification of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and in the JCCV's (2017) framework of intellectual virtues.

Finally, children's reports also fit the Center for Curriculum Redesign's character education framework, which views meta-learning (consisting of metacognition plus meta-emotions) as a superordinate competency that sits above knowledge, skills, and character (CCR, 2024). Alongside cognitive reflection, this gives a prime role to meta-emotions, which are emotions about one's emotions and may prompt emotion regulation (Kristjánsson, 2023). An example of this may be one participant's frustration about wanting to be angry while also wanting to act well, which this framework would interpret as increased meta-emotion and a sign of progress in self-regulation.

Together, the present findings suggest that (1) children's honest self-awareness, including saying they did not always get better, can itself mark progress, since knowing themselves, recognising limits, and even acknowledging when they chose not to use a strategy are all part of growth; and that (2) broader gains in thoughtfulness, goal setting and routine-building, alongside linking strengths to real life beyond the mentoring space, may indicate growth in what character education frameworks consider to be a core, superordinate capacity (variously termed metacognition, *phronesis*, and meta-learning). Future work should investigate these relationships further. For example, it could test whether self-reflective capacities mediate later behavioural change by modelling metacognitive gains as pathways to outcomes (Dignath, Büttner, & Langfeldt, 2008) and examining whether shifts in such processes serve as mechanisms of change in broader psychosocial functioning (Crum et al., 2023).

This is particularly important since it has direct implications for how growth is measured. First, considering that greater honest self-awareness might make outcomes in typical fixed-response self-reports seem worse rather than better, future work could instead include measures of reflective honesty and self-understanding to capture the kinds of changes suggested by the qualitative data. Examples of such tools include the Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (Fonagy et al., 2016), the Self-Reflection and Insight Scale (Grant et al., 2002), the Comprehensive Intellectual Humility Scale (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016), or the HEXACO model's Honesty-Humility subscale (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Second, if metacognition, meta-emotion, and phronesis underpin growth, future work evaluating character-focused mentoring could directly assess these with child-appropriate metacognition tools (e.g., Junior Metacognitive Awareness Inventory; Sperling et al., 2002) and multi-method phronesis instruments (Darnell, Fowers, & Kristjánsson, 2022).

6.3.4 Limitations and directions for future research

While this study offers valuable insight into children's experiences of character-focused mentoring and potential pathways of growth, several limitations should be noted.

First, the sample may have been biased toward more engaged or satisfied children over those who disengaged, dropped out, or benefited less. Participation was voluntary and introduced at the very end of the programme. Holding focus groups just as children were saying goodbye to their mentors may have prompted more positive reflections, since people may remember events more positively after they have ended and negative affect associated with past events fades faster than positive affect (Mitchell et al., 1997; Walker et al., 2003). Indeed, although some challenges were discussed, few accounts explicitly questioned the programme's value. Future work could include children who disengaged or reported dissatisfaction.

Second, several response biases may have affected the focus groups. Despite an independent researcher conducting the focus groups, children's expectations of what adults wanted to hear, and awareness that I would be listening to focus group recordings, may have affected their responses. Furthermore, while focus groups were chosen to promote peer-supported reflection, they also carry risks of social desirability and conformity, and may affect who speaks, how honestly participants speak, and what feels acceptable to say, especially among classmates with pre-existing dynamics (e.g., friend groups, status, and conflict) (Krueger & Casey, 2015;

Morgan, 1997). Equally, more verbally confident pupils typically contribute more, potentially skewing the prominence of certain perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Future work could include complementary individual interviews to bring to the surface some quieter or dissenting views.

Discussing abstract constructs such as self-control or character is also developmentally demanding and children who engaged in more reflective, phronesis-aligned ways may have contributed richer data, whereas others, who engaged more intuitively or perhaps took away different benefits from the programme, may have lacked the vocabulary to articulate their experiences. This could have biased the results towards a more intellectual, rationalised, reflection-centred understanding of children's perceived growth. Indeed, some children (e.g., Brittany, Abdullah, Anasir, Sara, Lucas) featured more prominently in the data, whereas others (e.g., Stacie, Rua, Hina) contributed less. For example, Stacie expressed that she enjoyed the programme and learned a lot, yet repeatedly answered questions with a "pass," twice signalled not understanding, and often responded only nonverbally (e.g., nodding, giving a thumbs up). While this was partly the result of intentionally telling children they did not have to answer any question that they did not want to answer, to reduce pressure, it may have led to a dataset skewed towards an emphasis on the importance of nuanced reflection.

Third, my own positionality may have introduced analytic bias (see also section 4.5). My involvement in programme design and curriculum development likely shaped how I framed questions and what I noticed. Although data were anonymised in transcripts, I had listened to recordings and was not blind to participants' identities. My prior knowledge of groups, mentors, and specific children from staff meetings and session visits may have influenced my understanding and interpretation of their responses. I sought to counter this through regular discussions of emerging themes and subthemes with my primary supervisor, who was independent of the programme, and by keeping an audit trail and revisiting codes. Still, my awareness of the aims and structure of the programme, my knowledge of the wider mentoring and character education literature, and my initial, more deductive coding may have continued to shape my approach even after shifting to more inductive, latent analysis. This could have led to certain constructs (e.g., honesty, humility, reflection, phronesis, self-regulation) being foregrounded, and to children's idioms (e.g., "levelling up," "just going on," "thinking twice") being interpreted within those frameworks.

Finally, there was no direct triangulation with other measures, such as additional self-reports, mentor, teacher, or parent/carer input, and behavioural or observational indicators, and no assessment beyond programme completion. Given well-documented informant discrepancies, combining children's accounts with other perspectives and observation-based data would strengthen inference (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Mehl et al., 2015). Follow-up assessments are equally recommended to test long-term impacts (Durlak et al., 2011; Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007). Future work could also systematically compare specific participant characteristics and micro-contexts, such as mentor style, facilitation approach, session counts, activities completed, project leader characteristics, cohort differences, and gender or ethnicity match, to tease apart which factors and processes most strongly shape experience and growth. For example, previous research has found discrepancies between mentor and mentee perceptions of relationship quality (e.g., Kern et al., 2019), so directly matching mentee accounts with mentor diaries and indicators of engagement, satisfaction, understanding, and growth, could shed light on some of the processes and mechanisms at play.

Future work could also investigate the mechanisms proposed earlier, such as the role of authenticity, informality, and anticipatory empathy in experiences of closeness and closure, including potential moderation by individual characteristics such as attachment history (Spencer, 2006b). Studies could triangulate mentee and mentor reports of mutuality and boundary understanding (Liang et al., 2002; Pryce, 2012; Spencer & Rhodes, 2014) and test whether anticipatory-empathy practices, structured closure protocols, and tailored mentor training, such as PYD and ecological-systems awareness, attachment-informed training, and process-oriented closure training, buffer distress at endings while preserving relational benefits (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2013; The National Mentoring Resource Center, 2021; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017).

Future research could equally examine blended-format dynamics more closely. Building on the present accounts of flexibly working with friends and multiple adults, growth could be modelled as a function of individual- and group-level configurations that combine “vertical” mentor support with “horizontal” peer support (e.g., small-group work, drawing on multiple mentors). The role of youth choice in configuration could be tested experimentally or quasi-experimentally to investigate the suggestion that it may act as an active ingredient in blended

mentoring (Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021). To explore facilitation, studies could pair structured observations of how leaders balance flexibility, connection, and play with group-cohesion indicators, social-network maps of in-group ties, and individual outcomes (Dowd et al., 2015; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014; Sánchez et al., 2018). Finally, future research could further investigate the links between self-awareness, honesty, and reflective metacognition and subsequent growth by using longitudinal or experimental designs to model self-awareness and meta-emotional reflection as mediators of behavioural change (Kristjánsson, 2023). This could include adding brief metacognitive training and testing its effects on character outcomes.

Overall, this study suggests that close, authentic ties with mentors, the scaffolding of the group, and children's growing self-awareness and reflectiveness may work together to support children's character growth and PYD. Designing programmes that intentionally cultivate these conditions, and measuring change in ways that capture their reflective, gradual nature, may offer an avenue for future research and practice.

Chapter 7 Study 3: A quantitative examination of outcomes in a character-focused youth mentoring programme

This study adds a complementary quantitative strand to the primarily qualitative design of this thesis. Studies 1 and 2 explored how children and mentors experience a character-focused mentoring programme and how change may occur within it, with particular attention to relationships, programme processes, and participants' interpretations of their experiences. Building on these studies, Study 3 compares change over time between children aged 9-11 who participated in the programme and a control group drawn from the same schools and year groups.

In line with the thesis's research questions set out in section 4.4, it therefore focuses most directly on whether changes in outcomes related to character growth and PYD are associated with programme participation, responding to an ongoing lack of clarity in the field about which outcomes character education programmes support in practice, particularly when delivered through relationship-based youth mentoring. It also aimed to examine whether standardised self-report measures, prominent in programme evaluation, can capture changes associated with participation in the character-focused mentoring programme. The primary research question was whether change over time on the selected outcome measures would differ between the programme and control groups.

The study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control-group design. The following exploratory hypotheses were proposed:

- (a) H1 (Goal orientation): Children in the programme group will show a greater increase in goal orientation scores from pre- to post-test than children in the control group.
- (b) H2 (Five Cs of PYD): Children in the programme group will show a greater increase in Five Cs scores from pre- to post-test than children in the control group.
- (c) H3 (Control): Children in the programme group will show a greater increase in sense of control scores from pre- to post-test than children in the control group.
- (d) H4 (Self-esteem): Children in the programme group will show greater improvement in self-esteem scores from pre- to post-test than children in the control group.

These hypotheses were tested using a repeated measures design to assess whether change over time differed significantly between the programme and control groups.

7.1 Method

7.1.1 Participants

Participants were 134 children (74 female, 60 male) aged 9-11 from four primary schools in Glasgow where the character-focused mentoring programme was delivered. Of these, 61 children (33 female, 28 male) participated in the programme (programme group) and 73 children (41 female, 32 male) who were attending the same schools and classes but did not participate in the programme (control group) took part. Although children in the programme group were selected by schools primarily on the basis of perceived need, the control group was drawn from the same classes, and some were expected to participate in WISE in subsequent years. A total of 299 children (117 programme, 182 control) filled in either the pre-test or the post-test questionnaire, but only 134 of these filled in both.

7.1.2 Measures

The measures used were selected based on programme objectives and broadly measured qualities related to character and positive development. Four standardised self-report measures, which have been validated with children aged 9-11, were selected and grouped into a single questionnaire with four parts, which was given to all of the children both before and after the programme (Appendix D1). All items used Likert-type response scales. The questionnaire took around 20-30 minutes to complete at each time point.

The *Children's Hope Scale* (CHS; Snyder et al., 1997) was chosen because it measures children's goal-oriented thinking, corresponding to the programme's aim of developing children's ability to set goals and persevere towards them. While the authors of the measure describe this as youth hopefulness, they instruct that the scale be named "Questions About Your Goals" when given to children. In order to keep questionnaires short and avoid redundancy, this study used the validated shortened 4-item CHS, which includes questions such as "When I have a problem, I can come up with lots of ways to solve it" (Item 3), answered on a six-point

Likert scale ranging from “None of the Time” to “All of the Time” (Bickman et al., 2010; Dew-Reeves, Athay, & Kelley, 2012).

The *Positive Youth Development Very Short Form (PYD-VSF)* (Geldhof et al., 2014) was chosen because it measures the Five Cs in the PYD Model of *competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring* (Bowers et al., 2010), which are broadly related to the overall aims of the programme. This 17-item scale was titled “Questions About You” and included questions such as “I do very well in my classwork at school” (Item 2, competence), “I hardly ever do things I know I shouldn't do” (Item 5, character), “All in all, I am glad I am me” (Item 7, confidence), “When I see another person who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for them” (Item 12, caring), and “I am a useful and important member of my family” (Item 15, connection) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”

The *Control-Individual Protective Factors Index (IPFI-Control)* (Springer & Phillips, 1995) was chosen because it measures self-efficacy and self-control, both outcomes that the programme aims to develop. This instrument was titled “Do these sentences match your feelings?” and consisted of 13 items, including questions such as “Other people decide what happens to me” (Item 1, self-efficacy), “If you work hard, you will get what you want” (Item 5, self-efficacy), and “Sometimes I break things on purpose” (Item 12, self-control) on a 4-point Likert scale with the options “YES!”, “yes”, “no”, and “NO!”

Finally, the *Weinberger Adjustment Inventory Low Self-Esteem Subscale (WAI-LSE)* (Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990; Weinberger, 1997) was chosen because it measures self-esteem, particularly low self-esteem, and was therefore included as an indicator of change in self-esteem over time. The 7-item subscale was titled “How true are these sentences about you?” and included questions such as “I’m not very sure of myself” (Item 1) and “I feel that I am a special or important person” (Item 6) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Not true” to “True.”

7.1.3 Design

A quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control-group design was used. 61 children in the programme and 73 children from the same classes who were not in the programme completed questionnaires at two time points, before and after the programme, which lasted nine months.

The research question was whether change over time differed by group, i.e., whether the mean change from pre-test to post-test would differ between programme participants and control-group participants. This was the most appropriate question to ask as I was interested in youth growth and development, but needed to control for changes that might have occurred naturally as a result of the children being nine months older.

Analytically, this was implemented as a two-way mixed (repeated-measures) ANOVA with one between-subjects factor (group) and one within-subjects factor (time). The dependent variables were the four outcome scales: goal orientation (CHS), the Five Cs (PYD-VSF), control (IPFI-Control), and low self-esteem (WAI-LSE). A mixed ANOVA was selected because the research question focused on whether patterns of change over time differed by group. An ANCOVA would also have been possible, particularly for estimating adjusted post-test differences, but the mixed ANOVA aligned more directly with the exploratory change-focused framing of the study.

7.1.4 Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, and permission to approach schools was granted by the Education Services Research Group at Glasgow City Council (Appendices D2 and D3). Consent was also secured from the mentoring organisation (Appendix D4) and from participating primary schools. The study was not expected to constitute a high risk to participants. Still, careful consideration was given to ensuring that informed consent was given, and both parental and child consent/assent was required to respect parents' protective role as gatekeepers while acknowledging children's capacity to make informed decisions (Lambert & Glacken, 2011).

Information sheets emphasised that participation was completely voluntary and that not taking part would not in any way impact children's relationship with the mentoring organisation. They also explained that data would be securely stored and anonymised. Forms used simple language, large text, and pictures (Clark, 2011). Before completing the questionnaire, the study was again verbally explained to children and it was made clear that they did not need to participate even if both they and their parents had filled in consent forms, that their participation or non-participation would not impact their ability to take part in the programme, and that they could

skip any questions they did not want to answer and decide to not complete the questionnaire if they no longer wanted to participate.

It was also explained that there were no right or wrong answers and that the questions were not in any way an evaluation of them, but of the mentoring programme. As in the previous studies, the safety and wellbeing of participants was prioritised. The questionnaires were carefully selected and have been used extensively in the field to measure variables of interest in children of this age. Safeguarding processes ensured that children's best interests were protected, and the schools' safeguarding leads were aware of the questionnaires being filled out, in case anything distressing were to arise for the participants.

Access to a reduced Study 3 dataset may be granted on reasonable request, subject to data protection requirements. Any shared dataset would exclude contextual variables that could make participants or schools recognisable.

7.1.5 Procedure

7.1.5.1 Data collection procedure

Parents of children in the relevant year group of the four participating schools in Glasgow were contacted about the research. Those who expressed an interest in the study received an information sheet and parental consent form as well as an information sheet for children and consent form for children (Appendix D5). Pupils who returned the signed consent forms were invited to fill in the paper questionnaire at a set time during the school day towards the beginning of the school year. Paper questionnaires were administered by teachers for logistical reasons and to reduce the possibility that children would feel obliged to respond positively to the researcher or programme staff. Teachers received printed administration instructions. They again explained the study to the children and reminded them that their participation was voluntary. If children did not wish to participate, they were given an alternative task. Those children who were participating in the mentoring programme then took part in weekly mentoring sessions for most of the academic year (from October to June) (see section 4.3 for details of the programme). The data collection procedure was then repeated again nine months later.

Children wrote their name, gender, school, and age on the cover page of the questionnaires before completing it. Once questionnaires were completed and returned, each child's name was replaced with a unique random five-digit code. Identifiers linking children's name to their code were retained, stored securely, and deleted once all data collection was complete.

7.1.5.2 Data analysis procedure

Following data collection, all questionnaire responses were compiled. Of the 299 pupils who completed either the pre-test or post-test, only those with data at both time points were included in the repeated-measures analyses, yielding a paired sample size of 134. The remaining 165 pupils contributed data at a single time point only, largely due to pupil absences and administration constraints (e.g., some classes were unable to schedule one of the questionnaire sessions).

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 20). A two-way mixed ANOVA was conducted for each of the four outcome measures to examine differences in change over time, with group as the between-subjects factor (programme and control) and time as the within-subjects factor (pre- and post-test). This allowed for the analysis of main effects and the interaction between group and time, which addressed the key question of whether change in scores over time differed between the programme and control groups (Field, 2013).

Prior to conducting the ANOVAs, data were screened for assumptions of normality, outliers, and homogeneity. Normality was assessed using Normal Q-Q Plots and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, outliers were identified via studentised residuals (values $> \pm 3$), and homogeneity of variances and covariances were tested using Levene's test and Box's M test, respectively. These checks were conducted in accordance with established recommendations for robust parametric testing (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Where distributions were clearly non-normal, I conducted standard transformations (logarithmic, square root) and ran sensitivity analyses to check robustness.

7.2 Results

Assumptions were acceptable for CHS. The data showed minor normality departures but given the robustness of ANOVA to this (Schminder et al., 2010) and since all other assumptions were met, the analysis was conducted without transformation. The PYD-VSF, IPFI-Control, and WAI-LSE outcomes, in contrast, showed substantial departures from normality. Additionally, the homogeneity of variances assumption was violated in the PYD-VSF data and the homogeneity of covariances assumption was violated in both the PYD-VSF and the IPFI-Control.

PYD-VSF and IPFI-Control scores were negatively skewed, so reflected transformations were applied. Because the PYD-VSF distribution showed stronger skew, a reflected logarithmic transformation was used; for the less strongly skewed IPFI-Control distribution, a reflected square-root transformation was used. WAI-LSE scores were positively skewed, so a logarithmic transformation was applied. These transformations were selected in line with standard recommendations (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Transformations improved normality, although all three datasets remained marginally non-normal. Homogeneity of variances and covariances were also improved but still remained weakly violated in PYD-VSF (both variances and covariances) and IPFI-Control (variances only). Given the exploratory nature of the study, the availability of sensitivity analyses, and the robustness of ANOVA to minor violations, assumptions were considered acceptable.

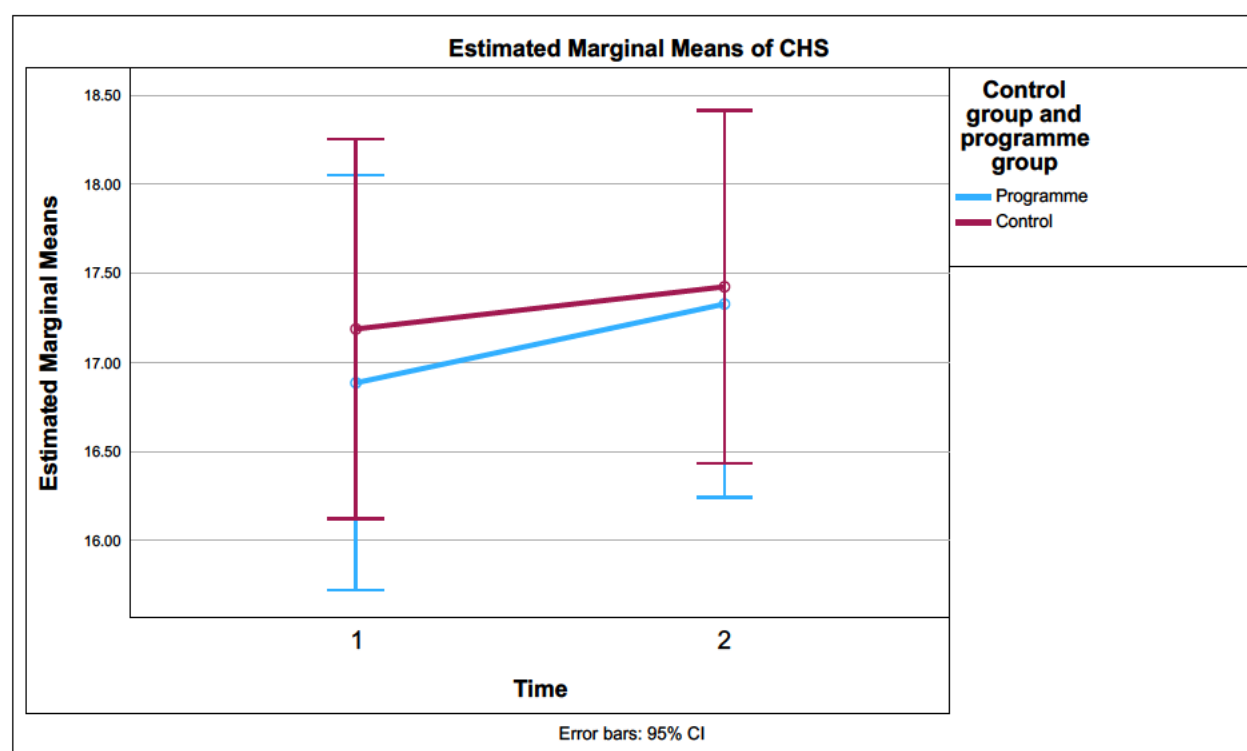
Of the 134 participants with data at both time points, some skipped sections or did not complete the entire questionnaire, so per-scale participant numbers differ slightly; non-responses are reported as “Missing N” in tables.

7.2.1 Goal orientation (CHS)

Mean scores on the *Children’s Hope Scale* (CHS), which measured goal orientation, were lower at pre-test than at post-test in the programme group and slightly lower at pre-test than at post-test in the control group (see Table 5 and Figure 9), indicating a slightly greater increase in mean scores in the programme than the control group.

Table 5*Descriptive data for CHS scale scores*

Group	Time	CHS Mean	CHS SD	Missing N	N
Programme	Pre	16.9	4.75	0	61
Programme	Post	17.3	4.42	0	61
Control	Pre	17.2	4.48	0	73
Control	Post	17.4	4.17	0	73

Figure 9*Estimated marginal means of CHS scale scores*

However, results of a two-way mixed ANOVA revealed a non-significant group $\times$ time interaction, $F(1, 132) = .066$, $p = .797$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$ as well as a non-significant main effect of time, $F(1, 132) = .724$, $p = .397$, partial $\eta^2 = .005$, and group, $F(1, 132) = .091$, $p = .763$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$.

7.2.2 The Five Cs of PYD (PYD-VSF)

Mean scores on the PYD Very Short Form (PYD-VSF) scale were slightly lower at pre-test than at post-test in the programme group and slightly higher at pre-test than at post-test in the control group (see Table 6 and Figure 10), indicating a slight increase in scores in the programme group and a slight decrease in scores in the control group.

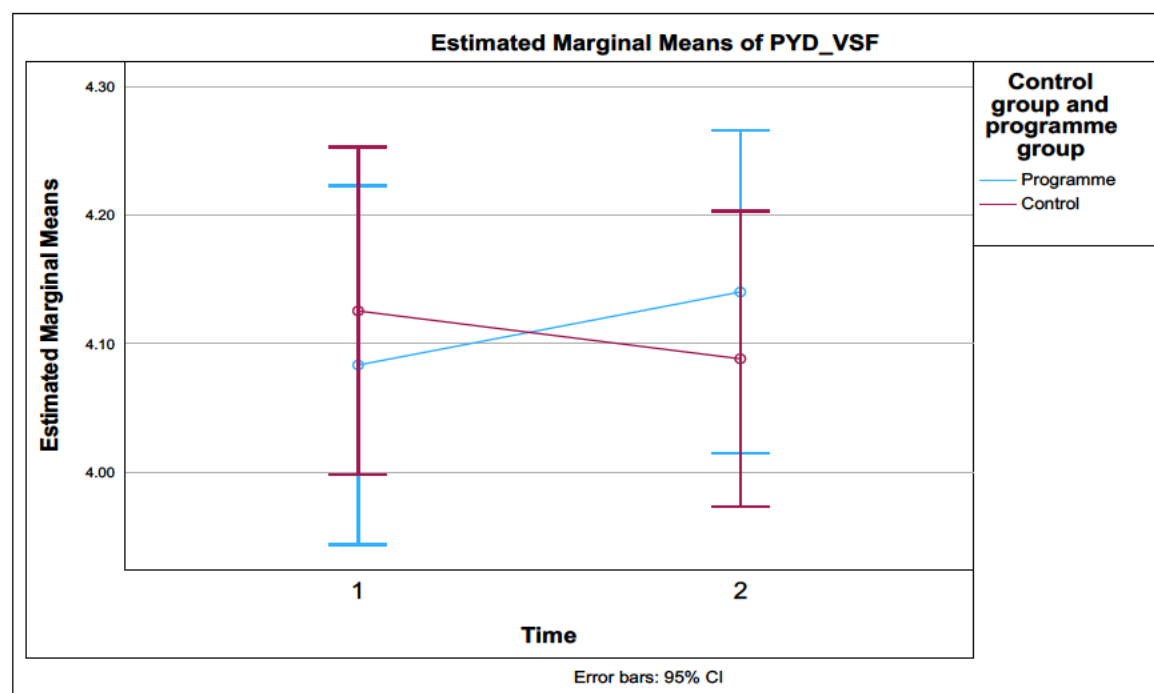
Table 6

Original descriptive data for PYD-VSF scale scores

Group	Time	PYD-VSF Mean	PYD-VSF SD	Missing N	N
Programme	Pre	4.08	.67	0	61
Programme	Post	4.14	.49	0	61
Control	Pre	4.13	.43	0	73
Control	Post	4.09	.50	0	73

Figure 10

Original estimated marginal means of PYD-VSF scale scores



A two-way mixed ANOVA conducted on the untransformed data, despite violations of normality, homogeneity of variances, and homogeneity of covariances, revealed a non-significant group $\times$ time interaction, $F(1, 132) = 1.171$, $p = .281$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$ as well as a non-significant main effect of time, $F(1, 132) = .051$, $p = .821$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$, and group, $F(1, 132) = .004$, $p = .95$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$.

A reflected logarithmic transformation improved normality and homogeneity of variances and covariances. With this adjustment, the mean improvements of these reflected and transformed PYD-VSF scores remained slightly greater in the programme group than in the control group (see Table 7 and Figure 11).

The substantive conclusion remained unchanged; there was no statistically significant group $\times$ time interaction, $F(1, 132) = .297$, $p = .587$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. There was also no significant effect of time, $F(1, 132) = 2.29$, $p = .133$, partial $\eta^2 = .017$, or of group, $F(1, 132) = .131$, $p = .718$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$.

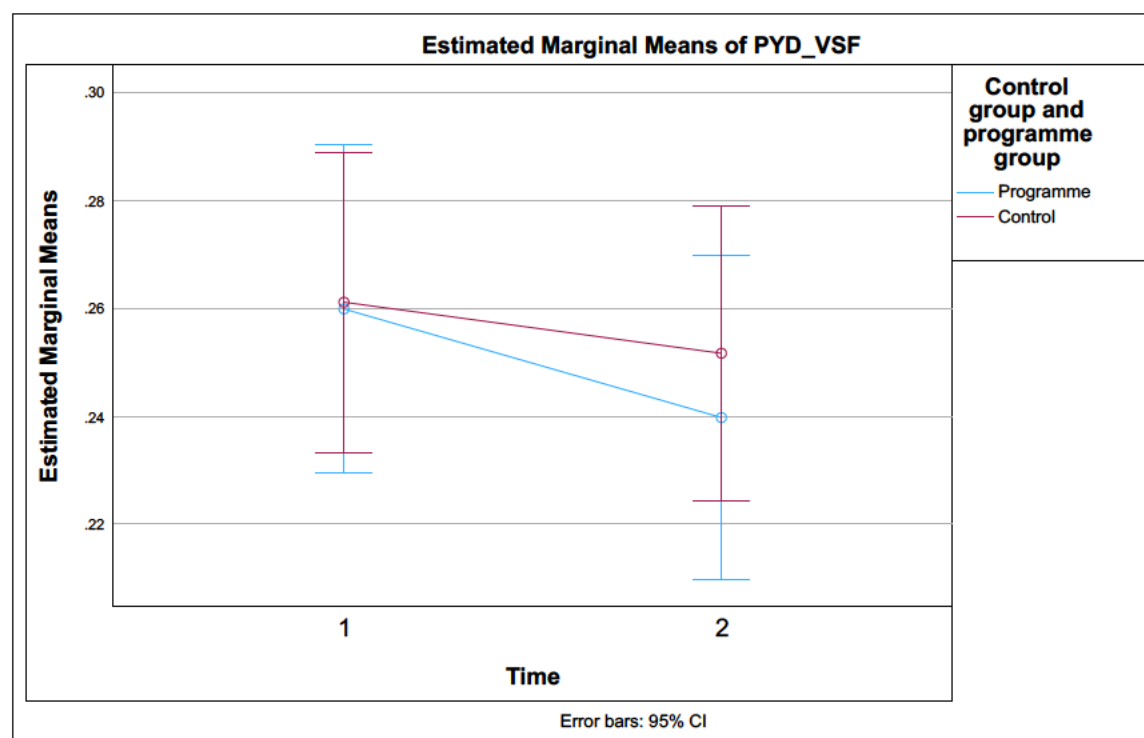
Table 7

Descriptive data for transformed (reflected log) PYD-VSF scale scores

Group	Time	PYD-VSF Mean	PYD-VSF SD	Missing N	N
Programme	Pre	.26	.138	0	61
Programme	Post	.24	.117	0	61
Control	Pre	.26	.103	0	73
Control	Post	.25	.119	0	73

Figure 11

Estimated marginal means of transformed (reflected log) PYD-VSF scale scores



7.2.3 Control (IPFI-Control)

Mean scores on the IPFI-Control subscale were marginally lower at pre-test than at post-test in the programme group and higher at pre-test than at post-test in the control group (see Table 8 and Figure 12), indicating a slight increase in scores in the programme group and a slight decrease in scores in the control group.

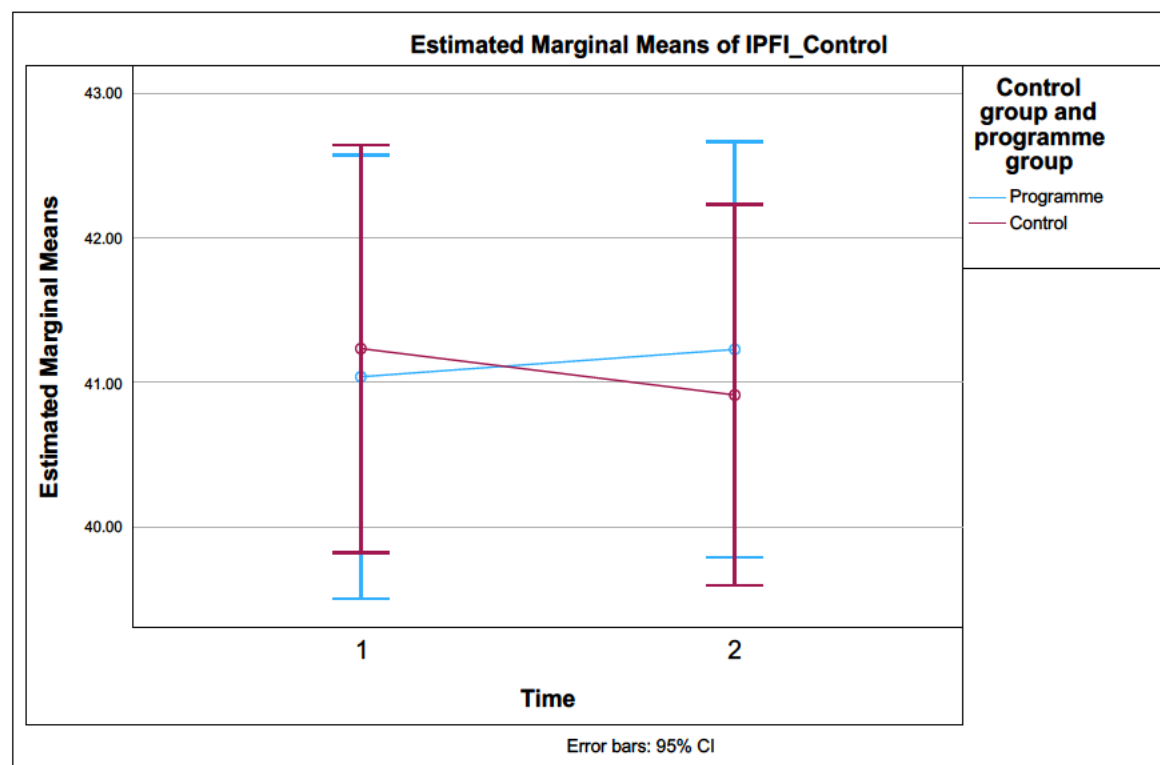
Table 8

Original descriptive data for IPFI-Control scale scores

Group	Time	IPFI-Control Mean	IPFI-Control SD	Missing N	N
Programme	Pre	41.0	6.42	2	59
Programme	Post	41.2	4.92	2	59
Control	Pre	41.2	5.56	3	70
Control	Post	40.9	6.08	3	70

Figure 12

Original estimated marginal means of IPFI-Control scale scores



A two-way mixed ANOVA conducted on the untransformed data, despite violations of normality and homogeneity of covariances, revealed a non-significant group $\times$ time interaction, $F(1, 127) = .29$, $p = .591$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$ as well as a non-significant main effect of time, $F(1, 127) = .019$, $p = .89$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$, and group, $F(1, 127) = .004$, $p = .947$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$.

A reflected square-root transformation improved normality and homogeneity of covariances. With this adjustment, the transformed mean IPFI-Control scores were broadly the same at pre-test and post-test in the programme group and were marginally lower at pre-test than at post-test in the control group (i.e., worse at post-test, since these are reflected values) (see Table 9 and Figure 13).

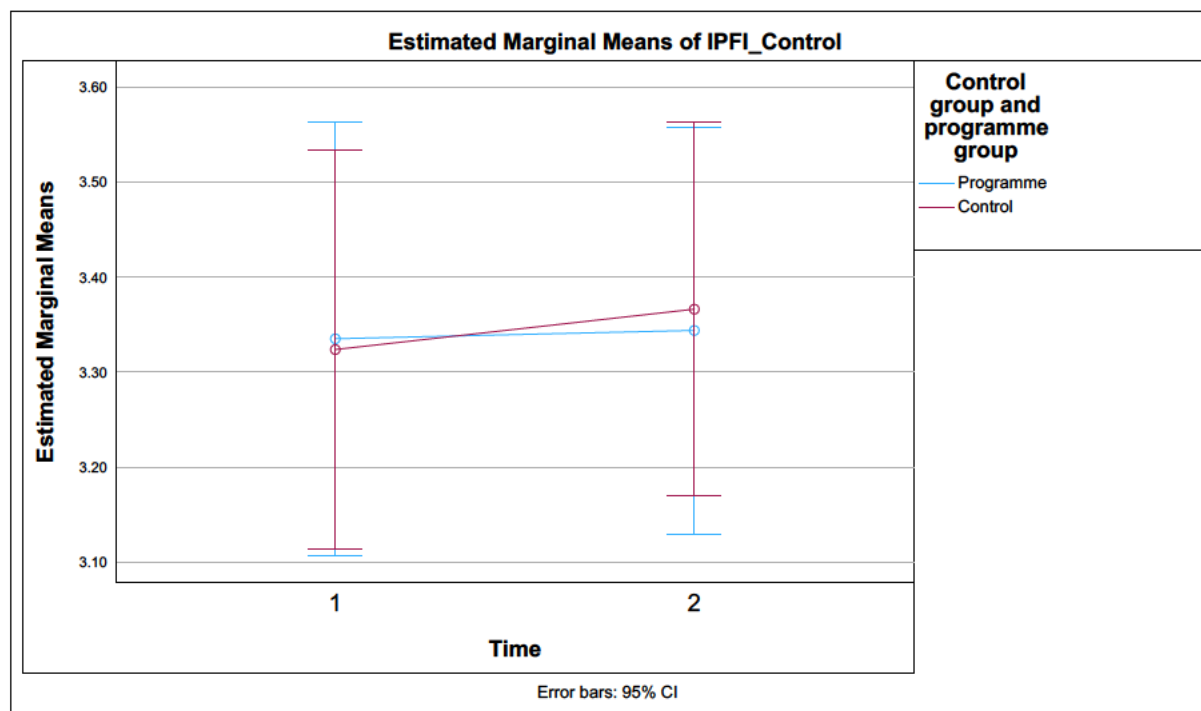
Table 9

Descriptive data for transformed (reflected square root) IPFI-Control scale scores

Group	Time	IPFI-Control Mean	IPFI-Control SD	Missing N	N
Programme	Pre	3.34	.92	2	59
Programme	Post	3.34	.77	2	59
Control	Pre	3.32	.85	3	70
Control	Post	3.37	.88	3	70

Figure 13

Estimated marginal means of transformed (reflected square root) IPFI-Control scale scores



The substantive conclusion remained unchanged; there was no statistically significant group $\times$ time interaction, $F(1, 127) = .059$, $p = .809$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$. There was also no significant effect of time, $F(1, 127) = .135$, $p = .714$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$, or of group, $F(1, 127) = .002$, $p = .968$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$.

7.2.4 Self-esteem (WAI-LSE)

Mean scores on the WAI Low Self-Esteem scale (WAI-LSE) were higher at pre-test than at post-test in the programme group and slightly lower at pre-test than at post-test in the control group (see Table 10 and Figure 14), indicating a slight decrease in scores in the programme group and a slight increase in scores in the control group (lower scores indicate improved self-esteem, since this is a measure of low self-esteem).

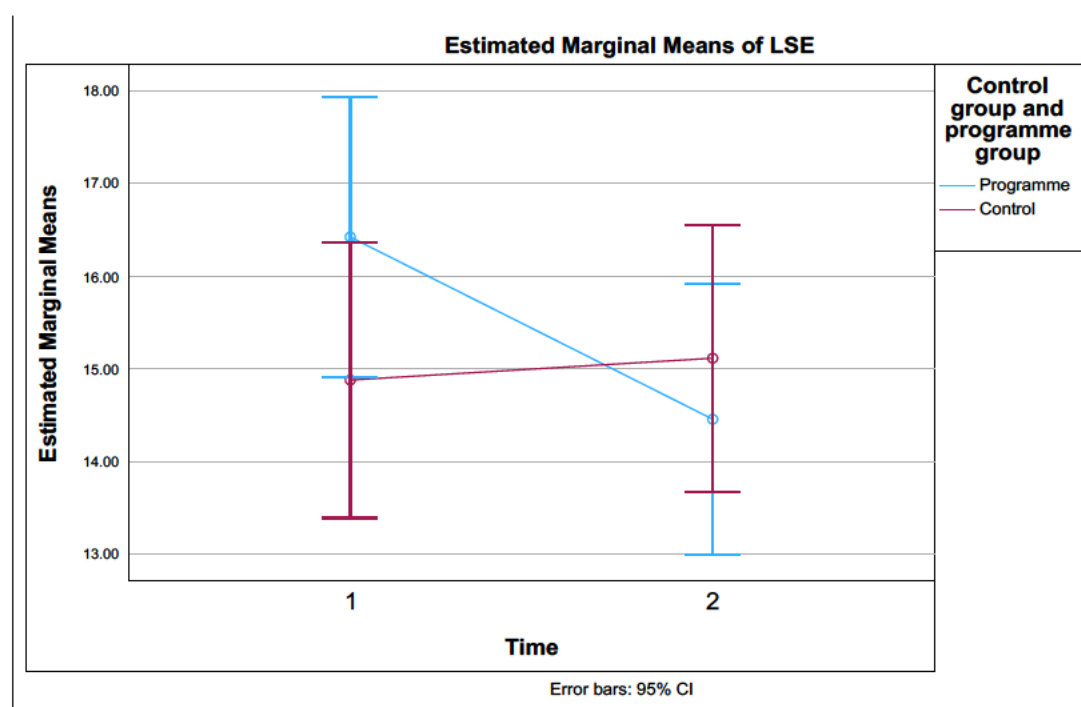
Table 10

Original descriptive data for WAI-LSE scale scores

Group	Time	WAI-LSE Mean	WAI-LSE SD	Missing N	N
Programme	Pre	16.42	6.91	0	61
Programme	Post	14.46	5.95	0	61
Control	Pre	14.88	4.87	10	63
Control	Post	15.12	5.58	10	63

Figure 14

Original estimated marginal means of WAI-LSE scale scores



A two-way mixed ANOVA conducted on the untransformed data, despite the presence of four outliers and non-normality, revealed a significant group $\times$ time interaction, $F(1, 122) = 5.69$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, and non-significant main effects of time, $F(1, 122) = 3.52$, $p = .063$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, and group, $F(1, 122) = .218$, $p = .642$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$.

A logarithmic transformation improved normality. Log-transformed WAI-LSE scores remained higher at pre-test than at post-test in the programme group and were approximately the same across time in the control group (see Table 11 and Figure 15).

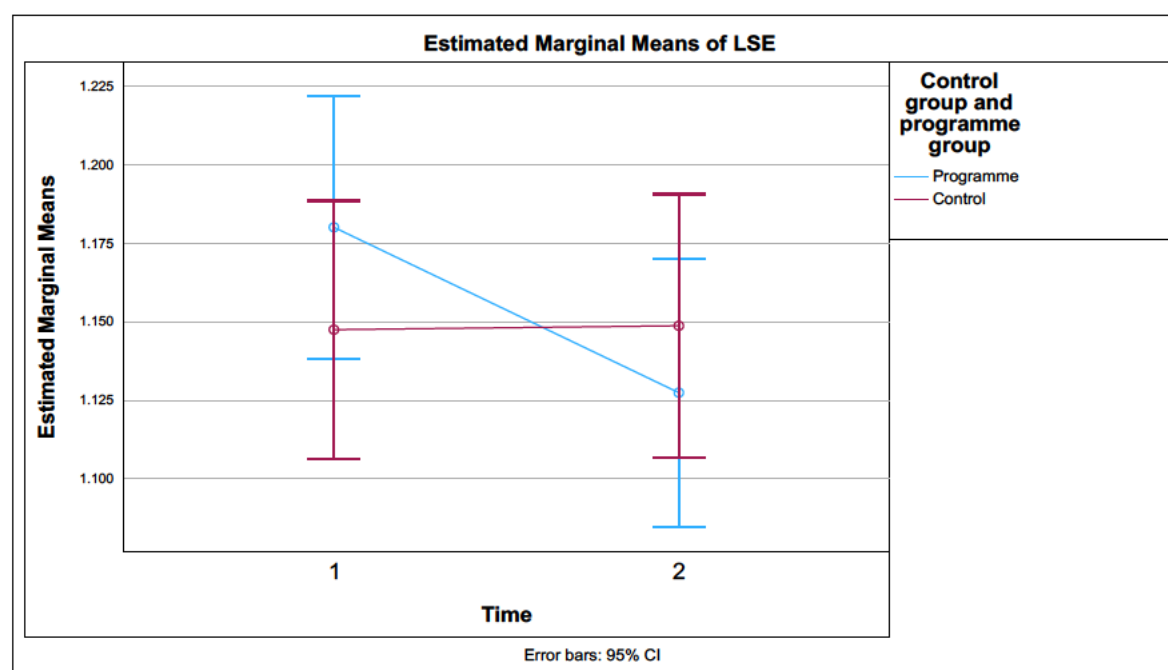
Table 11

Descriptive data for log-transformed LSE scale scores

Group	Time	LSE Mean	LSE SD	Missing N	N
Programme	Pre	1.18	.176	0	61
Programme	Post	1.13	.168	0	61
Control	Pre	1.15	.153	10	63
Control	Post	1.15	.168	10	63

Figure 15

Estimated marginal means of log-transformed LSE scale scores



The significant group $\times$ time interaction remained, $F(1, 122) = 4.52, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. There was also a significant main effect of time, $F(1, 122) = 4.12, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$ and a non-significant main effect of group, $F(1, 122) = .043, p = .835$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$.

Follow-up simple effects to unpack the significant interaction showed that scores changed over time in the programme group, $F(1, 60) = 7.83, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .115$, but did not change in the control group, $F(1, 62) = .005, p = .942$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$. Although the interaction reached conventional significance, the interaction effect was small (partial $\eta^2 = .04$) and variability remained high.

7.3 Discussion

Overall, while descriptive patterns across all four outcome measures (goal orientation, the Five Cs, control, and self-esteem) were broadly in the hypothesised direction, scores were highly variable, as reflected in large standard deviations, and no significant interactions or main effects were found for goal orientation, the Five Cs, or control. A statistically significant interaction between time and programme group was found only for low self-esteem (LSE) scores, both in the original data and after addressing non-normality and outliers through a log transformation. This indicates a greater reduction in self-reported low self-esteem over time for children in the programme group relative to the control group, although the effect was small.

The results warrant cautious interpretation. In the discussion that follows, I first consider the finding for low self-esteem and why this may have been the only outcome showing a detectable programme effect within the selected measures. Then I discuss the role of heterogeneity and person-specific patterns of change in explaining why outcomes may not have shifted uniformly. Next, I consider the implications of the findings for assessing character, specifically the need for more targeted measures aligned with programme theory and broader limitations of self-reports as measures of character. Finally, I discuss limitations of the study, including low power, comprehension limits, and ambiguity, and suggest how future research can tackle these challenges and considerations.

7.3.1 The effect of mentoring on self-esteem

The results suggest that children in the mentoring programme showed a small improvement in self-esteem (evidenced by reduced scores on the WAI Low Self-Esteem subscale) relative to the control group, which showed little change over time. This aligns with previous findings that positive relationships with non-parental adults improve young people's psychological wellbeing, including life satisfaction and self-esteem (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005), and that formal mentoring increases young people's global and domain-specific self-views, although effects are typically small (DuBois et al., 2011; Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010).

It is important to note that the WAI, which stands for the *Weinberger Adjustment Inventory*, is a measure of socioemotional adjustment under stressful external conditions. It assesses “low” self-esteem (LSE) rather than self-esteem per se, treating this as a facet of a broader “distress” domain, defined as a tendency to feel dissatisfied with oneself and with one's ability to achieve intended outcomes (Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990; Weinberger, 1997). The current results therefore illustrate a modest decrease in self-evaluative distress rather than simply a boost in confidence. Since low self-esteem in adolescence has been found to predict worse mental and physical health, economic prospects, and externalising problems in adulthood (Trzesniewski et al., 2006), even small reductions in LSE may be meaningful.

This finding is broadly consistent with the social-emotional and identity-development pathways of Rhodes' (2005) developmental model of mentoring. These pathways are based on the understanding that high-quality relationships can provide the emotional security, empathy, care, and positive appraisal that young people often benefit from for social-emotional adjustment (Harter, 1990; Schwartz et al., 2012). Indeed, previous literature suggests that mentors provide relief from daily stress (Raposa et al., 2019b) and that supportive relationships may buffer against the adverse impact of setbacks and negative self-feelings, with evidence that even reflecting on experiences of being accepted and valued can protect against these effects (Brummelman et al., 2014).

The finding is also aligned with results from the focus group study, which may provide further context for why self-esteem appeared especially responsive to mentoring. Children consistently described mentors as trusted, responsive adults who were “there for you,” highlighting the value of being listened to. Previous research links trust and care in mentoring relationships with

improvements in youths' self-worth (DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019b). Children also experienced a positive group culture, which has previously been linked with social-emotional gains, including improved self-esteem and reduced depressive symptoms (Hirsch, 2005; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021). Furthermore, children reported growing in their ability to overcome negative thoughts and cope with stress, in their self-understanding and personal identity, and in being proud and secure in their "own self." The children's accounts suggested that mentoring may be particularly helpful when children are more insecure or going through something challenging (see 6.2.1.2 "Facilitating growth through personalised support"), which may help to make sense of why low self-esteem, framed as a distress-related difficulty, showed a detectable group-level difference. Character-focused activities around setting goals, learning to think twice before acting, and linking curriculum themes to lived situations may also have supported a sense of competence and agency in everyday contexts, which is another route to improved self-perceptions (Bowers et al., 2010), although this was not picked up by scales that measured goal-oriented thinking and control directly.

Still, effects were small, variability was high, and statistical evidence was modest. High variability is not surprising in a real-world setting with a heterogeneous group of mentors and children with varying needs. Future research could investigate which child, mentor, and relationship characteristics are associated with the greatest improvements in self-esteem in order to better understand the processes and conditions under which mentoring is most effective. Nonetheless, the present findings provide preliminary but encouraging evidence that participation in a character-focused, relationship-centred, blended mentoring model was associated with reduced self-evaluative distress in late childhood.

7.3.2 Heterogeneity in mentoring effects and the challenge of person-specific change

Beyond low self-esteem, no significant group x time interaction or main effects were found for goal orientation (CHS), the Five Cs (PYD-VSF), or control (IPFI-Control). This pattern could be explained by heterogeneity in mentoring effects, the programme's deliberately child-specific PYD orientation, and the breadth of aims and activities within the programme.

First, a lack of uniform trends in the data is aligned with previous studies suggesting that, in real-world school settings, including youth interventions and mentoring programmes, effects

often vary across children and contexts (Durlak et al., 2011; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Mentoring outcomes have been found to be heterogeneous, shaped by children's individual characteristics, differences in dosage, fit, and local implementation, and relational characteristics, often producing substantial between-person variance alongside small average effects (DuBois et al., 2011; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Silke et al., 2019). The current study, investigating a real-world programme with many moving parts across multiple schools, mentors, and groups, may reflect this heterogeneity, with different children showing change in different dimensions.

Second, this pattern is consistent with the programme's grounding in PYD's more idiographic view of development. This encourages young people to take an active role in their development, values tailoring, and emphasises responsiveness to the individual, their needs, and their context (Tolan et al., 2016). Prior work suggests that even when programmes stipulate core content, this approach may lead to improvement unfolding idiosyncratically across pupils and contexts (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007).

Finally, programme design may also contribute. The curriculum encompasses a wide range of strengths (self-knowledge, growth mindset, goal setting, resilience, self-control, good judgement, and fairness). Core activities are completed by all children, in line with recommendations to integrate evidence-based practices (Elias et al., 2014). However, children and mentors have the freedom to select additional activities and adapt these to individual needs and context, in line with PYD practice. The result is a curriculum that operates somewhat like a "kitchen-sink" menu from which mentors and children select what is most relevant at a given moment. This breadth is intentional and consistent with evidence that broader character and social-emotional programmes often outperform narrower approaches (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Durlak et al., 2011; Lapsley & Yeager, 2012), likely because they engage a wider range of psychosocial competencies and outcomes (Elias et al., 2014; Yuan et al., 2025). In this sense, the programme's scope reflects an attempt to integrate multiple developmental aims within a single year-long programme while allowing flexibility to personalise activities.

While this may increase relevance and engagement, it also presents evaluation challenges. Each curriculum topic could plausibly be targeted more intensively and evaluated using more specific indicators. While low self-esteem may have functioned as a relatively global indicator of

psychosocial adjustment, more specific outcomes may require more sustained focus or more targeted measurement to register change over a single school year. It is also possible that children and mentors spent more time on some domains than others, depending on needs, preferences, and relationship dynamics, which could have resulted in change occurring in different domains for different children. Some children may also have enjoyed spending time on topics in which they were already strong, which might have further contributed to improvements in self-esteem and sense of self, as opposed to growth in a range of specific programme outcomes.

A PYD lens would suggest that rather than being a limitation, this breadth and flexibility contributed to the idiographic nature of growth. If this is the case, non-significant findings on uniform measures may reflect person-specific trajectories within a tailored, relationship-centred model, where effects vary across different outcome domains for different children (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Silke et al., 2019). In this context, standardised questionnaires that aggregate responses across domains may miss meaningful but individual-level gains (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015), reflecting a common tension in broad PYD programmes that support multiple psychosocial competencies across varied pathways (Lerner et al., 2011). This is consistent with Studies 1 and 2, where mentors and children highlighted different aspects of the curriculum as most salient and where mentors tailored topics, goals, and practices to each child. This presents a potential avenue for future research to model this heterogeneity and try designs that are more sensitive to person-specific change, such as person-centred analyses (Kusurkar et al., 2021) or idiographic outcome tools such as Goal Attainment Scaling (Kiresuk & Sherman, 1968; Logan et al., 2022).

7.3.3 Measurement constraints when assessing character in mentoring programmes

These considerations highlight, and contribute empirical insight into, measurement issues central to the study of character and PYD. On the one hand, the measures used in this study offered a conventional, psychometrically validated way to assess change over time, reflecting the emphasis on quantitative, controlled outcome measurement within positive psychology and programme evaluation more broadly (Seligman, 2011). The scales selected have been used extensively to measure PYD and related developmental outcomes (e.g., Hellman & Gwinn, 2017; Hoskins et al., 2018; Urban & Linver, 2016) and have established reliability, norms, and

guidance (e.g., Geldhof et al., 2014; Snyder et al., 1997). On the other hand, the findings illustrate two related challenges: (1) that generic measures may vary in how sensitively they capture programme-proximal change, particularly in programmes that are broad in scope but personalised in delivery, and (2) that fixed-response self-reports may struggle to capture the holistic, context-dependent, and multidimensional nature of character.

7.3.3.1 Aligning outcome measurement with programme theory and lived experience

First, the findings raise a question about alignment: whether the outcomes assessed in Study 3 map closely onto the programme's theorised mechanisms and the forms of growth most salient to children and mentors. Experimental and quasi-experimental guidance emphasises that outcome measures should closely map onto an intervention's theory of change and constructs that it aims to develop (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Shadish et al., 2002). Meta-analytic evidence also suggests that effects are stronger when measures match programme targets (Durlak et al., 2011), and some character education researchers have recommended using programme-specific outcomes rather than general distal proxies (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

By triangulating the quantitative findings with the qualitative evidence from Studies 1 and 2, the present research helps to clarify which outcomes are most central to this programme and how future evaluations might better reflect programme theory. Specifically, the qualitative findings suggested that the most significant growth described by children and mentors concerned process-oriented outcomes. These included increased self-awareness and identity articulation, reflective and metacognitive skills (e.g., noticing patterns in thoughts, emotions, and behaviour), emotion management and coping, goal setting, monitoring, and plan-revision, and relationship-based experiences of being listened to, supported, and valued (see sections 5.2 and 6.2). These accounts suggest that change was often experienced as shifts in young people's inner world and interpretation, alongside specific increases in self-regulation, rather than necessarily as broad uniform shifts in general indicators.

In order to minimise participant burden, I did not include measures corresponding to each of the seven curriculum topics in the current study. My original plan had been to analyse Studies 1 and 2 and then develop a tailored questionnaire for Study 3 based on the qualitative findings, to measure the areas of growth and change specifically suggested by these studies. However, I needed to begin data collection for Study 3 before the previous two studies were analysed due

to fixed school data-collection windows and delays in analysis. Therefore, a search of broadly related psychometrically validated measures led to the inclusion of the CHS, PYD-VSF, IPFI-Control, and WAI-LSE scales. However, while these scales were chosen to reflect programme objectives, they included a broader range of items than the programme closely targets, while also omitting outcomes that the qualitative studies suggest the programme might affect.

First, the measures used in the current study included items that may not be closely related to the programme's outcomes. For example, the PYD-VSF, relevant insofar as being a measure of the Five Cs of PYD, which is the most widely used PYD model, is broad in scope and includes several items that are tangential to the programme's aims. The item "I do very well in my classwork at school" (Five Cs, Item 2) taps into general academic competence, which the programme did not directly target, while "I am better than others my age at sports" (Five Cs, Item 3) reflects domain-specific ability, which some children may reasonably not rate highly (e.g., due to motor-skill differences or physical disabilities) and which could even decrease with more accurate self-appraisal after strengths-mapping activities. Similarly, "I receive a lot of encouragement at my school" (Five Cs, Item 14) measures whole-school climate and teacher practices rather than outcomes that the mentoring input directly targeted. The inclusion of such tangential items may reduce sensitivity to programme-specific change and make null effects less surprising even if other meaningful change did occur.

Second, the four chosen scales did not fully capture outcomes that the programme might have impacted. Both the overview of the curriculum (see section 4.3.2) and the qualitative findings described above (see sections 5.2 and 6.2) point to outcomes not included in any scale used here, such as increased self-awareness and identity articulation, goal-monitoring, resilience and coping skills, managing emotions, and metacognitive reflection. This is partly a result of being unable to analyse the findings of the previous studies in time to inform the selection of measures for the current study. But it may also relate to broader tensions in intervention research about existing scales often being too general, distant, or broad-brush to capture more specific changes and mechanisms (Clark & Watson, 2016; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

While there are clear benefits to using existing, validated, widely adopted scales, such measures may often not map onto a programme's specific aims and outcomes. It has even been suggested that comprehensive measures of positive development and wellbeing, such as the PYD-VSF,

may be better suited to population monitoring than to detecting the impact of targeted programmes (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Guidance on construct validity cautions against bandwidth-fidelity mismatches, suggesting that existing, broad scales may fail to capture the more proximal, narrower outcomes a specific intervention actually targets (Clark & Watson, 2016; Salgado, 2017). In other words, while validated, general measures are useful for feasibility and benchmarking, a targeted, multi-method battery tied closely to the programme's aims may have been more sensitive to the particular forms of growth the programme aims to cultivate. In the current study, this mismatch may have been exacerbated by the brevity of the questionnaire used. The CHS contains only four items (Snyder et al., 1997); the PYD-VSF, which contains 17 items, is condensed from the original 80-item and the 34-item Short Form version (Geldhof et al., 2014); IPFI-Control allocates just seven items to self-efficacy and six to self-control (Springer & Phillips, 1995); and the WAI-LSE is a seven-item index (Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990). This small set of brief scales was chosen in the interest of brevity and to minimise participant burden but may have further reduced sensitivity to the range of programme-proximal outcomes suggested by the qualitative studies.

Future evaluations of character-focused mentoring may therefore benefit from a more targeted, multi-method measurement approach tied closely to programme theory, while preserving rigour and, where relevant, comparability (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). A tailored questionnaire developed from the curriculum and qualitative findings could be used alongside standardised measures and idiographic tools (Kiresuk & Sherman, 1968; Logan et al., 2022).

7.3.3.2 What standardised self-reports may miss in character-focused mentoring

The findings also contribute insight to the constraints of using standardised measures to evaluate holistic, multidimensional, context-sensitive character-focused mentoring (JCCV, 2024; Kristjánsson, 2015; Lerner et al., 2011). Despite the benefits of using validated, widely adopted scales for intervention research, philosophical analyses of character have argued for moving beyond simple self-reports toward richer measurement, stressing the importance of situational nuance in integrating and applying character strengths and virtues to specific contexts (Kristjánsson et al., 2021) and highlighting metacognitive and meta-emotional layers of character and phronesis that may not be accessible through self-reports (Kristjánsson, 2023).

This echoes the broader argument developed earlier in the thesis that character is best understood as holistic and context-sensitive and may therefore be difficult to study using narrow or decontextualised measures alone.

In line with these critiques, one issue made visible in the current study was the extent to which some items in the self-reports invite conditional judgements (i.e., “it depends”). This is illustrated by a participant’s annotated IPFI-Control subscale response (Figure 16). The participant adds comments to five of the thirteen items, often highlighting the ambiguity of decontextualised statements. One notable item includes: “I am responsible for what happens to me” (Control, Item 7), to which the participant adds: “if I get hit with a car, I’m not responsible.” In response to “Sometimes I break things on purpose” (Control, Item 12), the participant notes: “I broke my tooth on purpose for it to fall out,” presumably referring to a wobbly tooth. While it is possible that the participant is intentionally pointing out the ambiguity of these questions through their comments, they make a valid point – that many of these warrant conditionality as the answer might depend on the specific situation and other related factors. Finally, the item “I do whatever I feel like doing” (Control, Item 10), which aimed to capture self-control, stood out as particularly vulnerable to reinterpretation, as participants often added a note, such as “depends,” or, as in Figure 16, “I have rights,” suggesting an interpretation of this item as measuring freedom or autonomy rather than self-regulation. Indeed, participants often answered this inconsistently with other self-control items (i.e., multiple children who otherwise scored highly on self-control items rated this low).

These annotations are informative because they make visible something that is typically hidden in fixed-response formats: that important nuances may be lost when complex questions are asked in a decontextualised way. In fact, participants’ thoughts and reflections about questions, including those that require conditional judgements, might be a better measure of their character than the specific response option they ultimately choose, reflecting the holistic, “being”-oriented, non-instrumental approach integral to character development and PYD, which integrates young people’s internal states, intentions, motivations, and emotions rather than focusing only on observable behaviour (Kristjánsson, 2010). The use of Likert scale self-ratings is further complicated by evidence that character is not a single unitary construct but consists of multidimensional factors (Fowers, 2005; McGrath, 2015), as such measures may not mirror this plurality (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Lapsley & Yeager, 2012).

Figure 16

Child's annotated questionnaire response (age 10)

Part 3: Do these sentences match your feelings?

		YES!	yes	no	NO!
1.	Other people decide what happens to me	☒	☐	☐	☐
2.	It is important to think before you act	☒	☐	☐	☐
3.	If I study hard, I will get better results	☐	☐	☐	☒
4.	When I try to be nice, people notice	☐	☐	☐	☒
5.	If you work hard, you will get what you want	☐	☐	☐	☒
6.	To make a good decision, it is important to think	☒	☐	☐	☐

at this point AI make people money without any work.

for tests etc they test how good you remember

no, if I get hit with a car im not responsible

		YES!	yes	no	NO!
7.	I am responsible for what happens to me	☐	☐	☐	☒
8.	Sometimes you have to physically fight to get what you want	☐	☐	☒	☐
9.	I get angry easily	☒	☐	☐	☐
10.	I do whatever I feel like doing I have rights	☒	☒	☐	☐
11.	When I am angry, I yell at people	☐	☐	☐	☒
12.	Sometimes I break things on purpose I broke my tooth on for it to fall out.	☒	☐	☐	☐
13.	If I feel like it, I hit people	☐	☐	☒	☐

Note. Image shows handwritten comments on selected items from the Control subscale. Photograph by the author, 2025. IPFI reproduced from Springer, J.F. and Phillips, J.L. Individual Protective Factors Index: A measure of adolescent resiliency; EMT Associates. 1995.

Self-reports are also vulnerable to well-established biases and blind spots, including social desirability, consistency motives, and limits of introspective insight (Douven, 2018; Kagan, 2009; Paulhus, 1991). There is evidence from personality science that reports by others

generally outperform self-reports for evaluative and morally charged traits, where motivated self-views and blind spots distort judgement (Vazire & Carlson, 2011). Issues of character are deeply tied to the self and may therefore need to be understood, at least partly, through young people's own self-understanding. However, these considerations raise questions about the use of simplified, fixed-response self-ratings, which may be particularly vulnerable to social desirability bias and may be difficult for children to self-assess reliably, although this is an inference rather than something directly tested in the current data. Examples of such items may include: "I think I am doing pretty well" (CHS, Item 1), "When I see someone being taken advantage of, I want to help them" (Five Cs, Item 11), and "I get angry easily" (Control, Item 9).

Finally, and relatedly, changes in self-reports may in fact reflect changes in standards or in the ability to introspect and accurately self-assess rather than true changes in the underlying construct. Previous research has found that interventions can shift participants' understanding of constructs, leading to a response-shift bias, where the frame of reference used to answer post-test items differs from that used at pre-test (Rosenman, Tennekoon, & Hill, 2011; Sprangers & Hoogstraten, 1989). Furthermore, people are often "unskilled and unaware," while gains in metacognitive competence have been found to lower self-estimates by increasing the ability to self-monitor (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). This aligns with the qualitative findings in Studies 1 and 2, where children and mentors described growth in self-awareness, metacognition, vulnerability, and honest acknowledgement of limitations.

Importantly, since increased metacognitive competence sharpens self-scrutiny and can reduce the positive bias often present in self-assessments (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Mehl et al., 2015), these gains may lower self-ratings even as underlying competence improves. This is directly relevant to ratings of character, since self-enhancement biases are particularly pronounced in the moral domain (Tappin & McKay, 2017). In practical terms, ratings of an item such as "I hardly ever do things I know I shouldn't do" (Five Cs Item 5, Character) may shift in different directions even when development is positive. Some children may experience genuine behavioural or regulatory gains and rate themselves more positively. Others may rate themselves more negatively post-programme not because character worsened but because they evaluate themselves more stringently in light of a deeper understanding of concepts such as character, self-control, fairness, or good judgement. At the group level, these effects may

obscure mean-level change, producing null or mixed quantitative patterns despite meaningful underlying development. In this context, limited pre-post change may not necessarily imply an absence of growth; it may reflect shifts in understanding, standards, and self-evaluation that are themselves consistent with programme aims.

7.3.4 Limitations and future directions

Several limitations of the current study may have further constrained inference. First, power was limited. Because mentoring effects are typically small (Cohen's d ranging from .11-.29 with a mean of .20; see section 3.4.2), substantially larger samples are usually needed to detect change reliably. A rough power calculation suggests that detecting a small group $\times$ time interaction at $\alpha = .05$ and $1 - \beta = .80$ would likely require approximately 650-850 participant, even before allowing for attrition and clustering, both of which further reduce power. Given the current $N = 134$ (dropping to $N = 124$ for some scales due to missing sections), the study was underpowered for small effects. This is compounded by the fact that the focal test was a group $\times$ time interaction, which generally has less power than main effects (Field, 2013; Maxwell et al., 2017). In addition, participants were nested within schools and mentor groups and even modest intraclass correlations in such clustered designs have been found to inflate standard errors and shrink the effective sample size (Field, 2013; Hedges & Hedberg, 2007).

Second, many assumptions of the two-way mixed ANOVA were violated. Major violations occurred for PYD-VSF (non-normality, heterogeneity of variances and covariances), IPFI-Control (non-normality, heterogeneity of covariances), and WAI-LSE (non-normality, outliers), necessitating transformations and sensitivity analyses. Minor departures were observed for CHS (non-normality) and even for the adjusted PYD-VSF (non-normality, heterogeneity of variances and covariances), IPFI-Control (non-normality, heterogeneity of covariances), and WAI-LSE (non-normality). These were deemed minor enough to proceed, since the mixed ANOVA is fairly robust to mild non-normality with reasonably similar cell sizes. However, normality departures can still reduce precision and power and widen confidence intervals, and covariance-homogeneity violations can slightly inflate Type I error rates, so results should be interpreted cautiously (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

Third, there was substantial within-group (i.e., between-person within condition) variance, evidenced by large standard deviations and wide confidence intervals. While some of this may

be explained by heterogeneity in a personalised, relationship-centred design, by the constraints of capturing multidimensional, context-dependent constructs, and by measuring broad, distal outcomes, this may have been amplified by measurement issues. Two specific issues may have increased error variance and lowered precision: comprehension demands and ambiguous or double-barrelled questions.

First, the children may have found the questions too difficult. Retrieving and integrating memories and mapping judgements onto scale points place heavy cognitive and interpretative demands on young people and require considerable abstraction and introspection (Karabenick et al., 2007). Many of the children across both the programme and control groups had complex learning needs and may have found abstract, linguistically complex, or reverse-coded items particularly challenging. Previous research has found that children's response quality is highly sensitive to comprehension burden and drops when items are abstract or complex (Borgers, De Leeuw, & Hox, 2000; Borgers, Hox, & Sikkels, 2003). Items such as "All in all, I am glad I am me" (Five Cs, Item 7) and "I am doing just as well as other kids my age" (CHS, Item 2) may be too general or abstract to answer easily.

Some items were also linguistically complex. For example, the item "I hardly ever do things I know I shouldn't do" (Five Cs, Item 5), includes stacked negations and an embedded clause. Furthermore, both the IPFI-Control and the WAI-LSE questionnaires included multiple reverse-coded items, which tend to add method variance and confusion rather than reduce bias, a problem magnified with younger respondents and those with complex needs (van Sonderen, Sanderman, & Coyne, 2013). For example, the item "I'm not very sure of myself" (LSE, Item 1) combines a global self-evaluation with a negation and reverse-keyed scoring, meaning that answering "true" yields a lower self-esteem score, which may be linguistically counterintuitive for 9-11-year-olds and may inflate measurement noise. Inconsistencies and measurement error in some response patterns support this interpretation.

On top of the above, the teachers who administered the scales were not experts and the measures were short, each offering a different Likert scale with varied options to choose from, which did not allow the children much time to get used to each scale before the response options changed again. In retrospect, pre-testing child-friendly items in a pilot study and using trained researcher-assisted administration, which is already standard in WISE programme feedback

forms and recommended for children, might have reduced comprehension burden (Borgers et al., 2003), although this would have been difficult to do with limited time, capacity, and while maintaining participant anonymity.

Second, many of the items were ambiguous or double-barrelled. Given the cognitive steps in survey responding, such items consistently yield noisy, inconsistent answers among participants (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000). For example, the items “Other people decide what happens to me” (Control, Item 1) and “If you work hard, you will get what you want” (Control, Item 5) could be read in multiple ways. The former could refer to specific day-to-day schedules, which many 9-11-year-olds do not have control over, or a more global interpretation of the general direction of their life, and the latter may depend on a wide variety of factors. Examples of double-barrelled items, which combine two separate ideas, include “I accept responsibility for my actions when I make a mistake or get in trouble” (Five Cs, Item 9) and “I am a useful and important member of my family” (Five Cs, Item 15), both of which include two contingencies; for example, a child might not see themselves as a “useful” member even while feeling that they are an “important” member of their family, again introducing noise.

These concerns reflect issues of fit and administration rather than a blanket critique of the instruments themselves. The CHS, PYD-VSF, IPFI-Control, and WAI-LSE are widely used scales that generally perform well in school-age samples. However, in this study’s context, additional scaffolds (e.g., piloted child-friendly wording, avoidance of reverse-keyed items, interviewer assistance, and a few brief, contextualised items alongside the global indices) were likely needed for these measures to perform as intended.

Overall, this study provides preliminary evidence that a relationship-centred, character-focused, blended mentoring model can reduce low self-esteem in late childhood, while also offering insight into some of the measurement issues central to the study of character and PYD, namely the benefits and challenges associated with using existing, validated, but potentially broad, distal, and decontextualised scales for detecting the impact of targeted programmes.

Future work could address these design and analysis issues directly. Future studies could recruit larger samples that are powered for the group x time interaction and account for clustering by school and group. Research could also use designs that can detect individual-level change even

when group means remain stable such as person-centred analyses. Adaptive designs such as Goal Attainment Scaling, alongside logging of “dose” and “fidelity” (e.g., attendance, covered activities, and quality and adherence ratings) would enable researchers to model individual-level differences and delivery practices to model what works, for whom, and when, and examine how best to tailor support (Kidwell & Almirall, 2023; Kusurkar et al., 2021; Logan et al., 2022).

Future evaluations of character-focused mentoring may benefit from more targeted measures more tightly aligned to the programme’s aims (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). In practice, this may involve replacing or complementing existing, broad scales with a tailored questionnaire that targets programme-specific outcomes such as self-awareness and identity articulation, growth mindset, goal-monitoring and plan-revision, resilience, coping skills, managing emotions, and metacognitive reflection (Shadish et al., 2002). Finally, future research could use contextualised, multi-method, and multi-informant assessments that complement brief self-ratings. Such designs could capture the complexity of character growth, children’s reasoning about concrete situations, and improvements in understanding, insight, and self-reflectiveness without mistaking these for decline. Examples may include situational vignettes (including anchoring vignettes to calibrate differing internal standards and to mitigate reference-shift effects); contextualised, age-appropriate scenarios, dilemmas, and situational judgement tasks (e.g., the scenario-based Intermediate Concept Measures); more open-ended explorations of reasoning; and behavioural or naturalistic observer ratings from teachers, parents/carers, peers, mentors, and project leaders alongside child ratings, improving validity and sensitivity to change (Arthur et al., 2015; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Darnell et al., 2022; Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Mehl et al., 2015; Thoma et al., 2013; Vazire & Carlson, 2011). Together, such designs may improve precision, power, construct validity, and sensitivity to change, while remaining faithful to the programme’s person-centred approach.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore and assess character-focused mentoring as a means of supporting character growth and Positive Youth Development (PYD) in late childhood. Its primary research question asked:

What are children's and mentors' experiences of character development in a character-focused mentoring programme?

More specifically, it asked how children and mentors participating in the WISE Mentoring programme experienced the mentoring relationship and the character-focused curriculum, what changes in children's character growth were associated with participation, which aspects of the programme participants saw as supporting change, and how character-focused mentoring might be improved to better support character growth and PYD (see section 4.4). To answer these questions, the thesis took a primarily qualitative, process-oriented approach, exploring mentors' and children's experiences of the programme and the perceived impact of participation on character growth among children aged 9-11. These questions were addressed through two main studies and one complementary study. Study 1 explored mentors' experiences through a longitudinal diary design. Study 2 explored children's experiences through focus groups. Study 3 added a complementary quantitative strand, comparing change over time between children who participated in the programme and a control group drawn from the same schools and year groups.

Taken together, the studies suggest that children and mentors experienced character development as a personally meaningful process, supported by the integration of close mentoring relationships, personalised support, and autonomy-supportive mentoring practices that helped children reflect on and apply character strengths in everyday life. First, both qualitative studies identified close, trusting mentoring relationships as central to engagement and growth. Children described mentors as people they could trust, talk to, laugh with, and turn to when they felt alone or unable to speak to adults elsewhere, while mentors emphasised attentive listening, care, authenticity, remembering what children shared, and building mentee-centred, reciprocal, and empowering relationships.

Second, both studies emphasised the importance of personalised, tailored support, particularly in the context of mentoring with structured curriculum activities. Mentors saw the curriculum as important in helping children name, discuss, and practise character strengths but saw its value as dependent on how it was personalised, highlighting the mutually affirming interaction between activities and a close relationship. Children appreciated that the mentors adapted activities to their preferences, connected curriculum concepts to their lives, and that they were there to offer personal support in specific challenges they were facing.

Third, children and mentors described change as becoming visible when programme ideas were taken into everyday life through open-ended dialogue about real experiences, reflections on decisions, support for mentees' independent thinking, shared goal setting, joint engagement with activities, and efforts to use strengths in school, home, peer, and family contexts. Across these accounts, the wider group and ecological context also mattered: children valued participating alongside friends and feeling part of a mentoring community, while mentors' reflections, particularly during the Covid-period, highlighted the benefits of peer and family engagement for better understanding children's everyday lives, creating a more supportive learning environment, and helping families understand what children were learning.

Studies 1 and 2 also converged around broad areas of change associated with participation, although children and mentors emphasised these in different ways. Children described growth in confidence, sense of self, self-awareness, self-regulation, thoughtfulness, intentionality, and applying character strengths in real situations. Mentors' accounts supported this pattern but tended to describe change through more process-focused observations, including children's increasing self-understanding and self-acceptance, openness, reflection, deeper engagement with curriculum tasks, and ability to connect programme content to everyday life. Mentors added that growth was not one-way, as they also saw themselves growing through the mentoring process. Study 3 partly triangulated this pattern by finding a small reduction in low self-esteem as the only detectable group-level outcome among the selected standardised measures. This supported the qualitative emphasis on confidence and sense of self. However, this study found no significant effects on the other measures of goal orientation, the Five Cs of PYD, and control, meaning that the quantitative findings provide only limited support for the broader qualitative pattern. This may indicate limited group-level effects, but may also reflect low power, heterogeneity, and the difficulty of capturing incremental, reflective, and person-specific character growth through brief self-report measures.

Overall, this thesis contributes significant insight and generates implications for future theory, practice, and research to consider. Conceptually, it advances a flourishing-oriented, expansive, PYD-grounded account of character-focused mentoring. This integrates Aristotelian character education, positive psychology and character strengths approaches, SEL-informed practices, and PYD into a framework for understanding character growth in a real-world mentoring context. This contribution will be developed in Section 8.1.

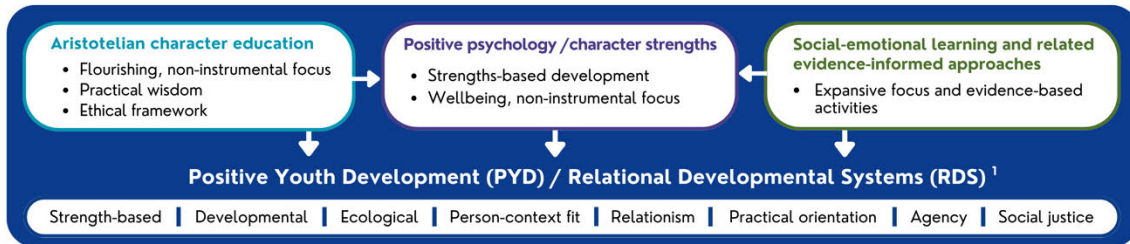
Empirically, the thesis offers a detailed account of how children and mentors experienced character development within a blended one-to-one and group mentoring programme with a character-focused curriculum. Specifically, it contributes insight into the outcomes associated with character-focused mentoring, particularly children's confidence, sense of self, reflective self-awareness, everyday self-regulation, and thoughtfulness. These outcomes will be discussed in Section 8.2. It also makes an empirically grounded theoretical contribution by proposing three potential, interacting mechanisms of change: relational support, structured curriculum engagement, and guided youth autonomy and applied practice. A key novel contribution of this work is insight into how mentoring with a structured curriculum may work, with the potential for relational depth, structured activities, and autonomy-supportive practice to reinforce one another. This will be developed in Section 8.3.

These contributions are synthesised in the integrated PYD model of character-focused youth mentoring presented in Figure 17. The model brings together the theoretical framing developed in Chapters 1-4 with the empirical findings from Chapters 5-7. It situates character-focused mentoring within a PYD/RDS framework (Part A), identifies the ecological context in which mentoring takes place (Part B), and summarises the proposed interacting mechanisms (Part C) and indicative outcomes (Part D). It also links these mechanisms and outcomes to existing frameworks introduced earlier in the thesis, including the character education pathways of character being “caught,” “taught,” and “sought” (JCCV, 2024), Goldner and Ben-Eliyahu's (2021) emotional, recreational, and promoting-catalysing components of mentoring relationships, Lyons et al.'s (2019) “sweet spot” of mentoring, and Rhodes' (2005) identity, social-emotional, and cognitive pathways of mentoring. These links offer conceptual anchors for the synthesis and will be further unpacked in the following sections.

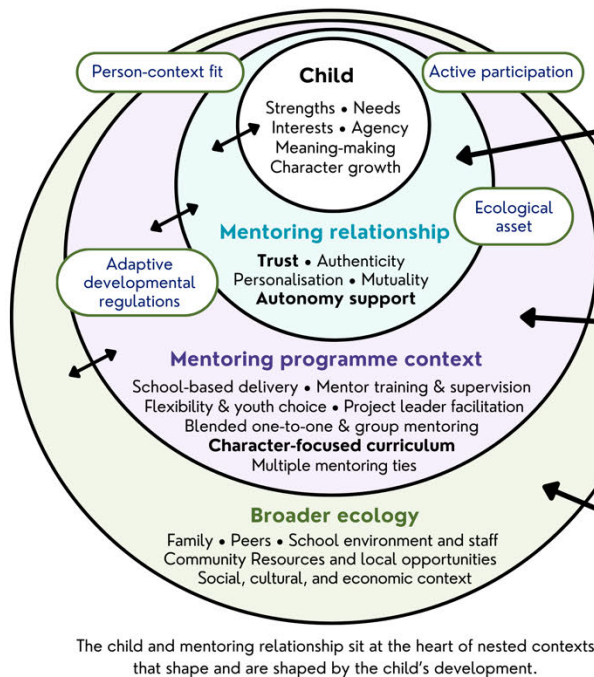
Figure 17

An integrated PYD model of character-focused youth mentoring

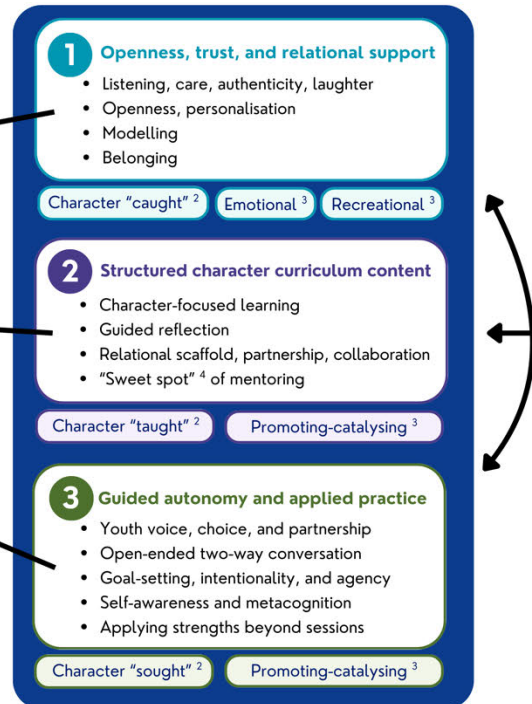
A. Theoretical foundations of a PYD-based approach to character



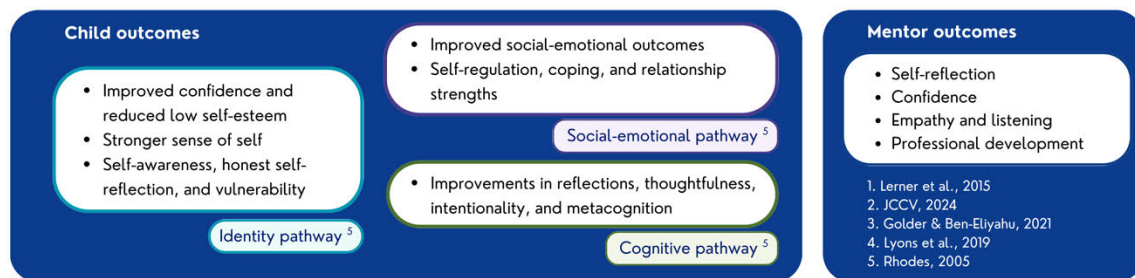
B. A PYD-based approach to character-focused youth mentoring



C. Key interacting mechanisms



D. Indicative outcomes



Note. The model situates character-focused youth mentoring within a PYD and RDS framework (Lerner et al., 2015), integrating Aristotelian character education, positive psychology and character strengths approaches, and related evidence-informed practices such as social-emotional learning. It positions the child and mentoring relationship within nested ecological contexts and foregrounds the interaction of three potential mechanisms: relational support, structured curriculum content, and guided autonomy and applied practice, alongside indicative outcomes. Both mechanisms and outcomes are connected to existing frameworks in the character education and youth mentoring literature discussed in the thesis (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; JCCV, 2024; Lyons et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2005).

The final contributions of this thesis are practical and methodological. Practically, the findings point to the importance of balancing closeness, authenticity, personalisation, and autonomy support with boundaries, structure, and guided scaffolding. These implications for practice will be discussed in Section 8.4. Methodologically, the thesis suggests that evaluations of character-focused mentoring need richer, context-sensitive methods capable of capturing gradual, reflective, and person-specific character growth. Recommendations for measurement and evaluation will be discussed in Section 8.5. Finally, Section 8.6 will consider limitations and directions for future research.

8.1 The case for a flourishing, expansive, PYD-grounded account of character-focused mentoring

The current research shows the value of drawing from several traditions concerned with young people's holistic development, including their wellbeing, identity, ethical responsibility, and social and emotional growth. Building on the conceptualisation of character set out in Chapters 1-4 (see especially sections 2.3 and 4.2), this section explains the theoretical foundations and PYD-based mentoring approach represented in Parts A and B of Figure 17. It makes the case for an account of character-focused mentoring that is (1) flourishing-oriented, meaning that character is understood through a strength-based, wellbeing-focused lens and valued not only for its effects on behaviour or achievement, but as part of children living and developing well; (2) expansive, meaning that character includes a wide range of interconnected strengths and qualities; and (3) grounded in PYD, meaning that character growth is understood ecologically, as shaped by the fit between young people and their contexts and supported through youth agency, sustained relationships, skill-building, and meaningful participation. The contribution of this framing is not only conceptual in the abstract sense; the findings also support its usefulness as a lens for interpreting children's and mentors' accounts of change in a real mentoring context.

8.1.1 Support for a flourishing-oriented conceptualisation of character-focused mentoring

First, this conceptualisation follows Aristotelian character education and character development approaches rooted in positive psychology by framing character and mentoring through a non-instrumental, strength-based, wellbeing and flourishing-oriented lens. This contrasts with deficit narratives that frame young people as problems to be managed and character education

or youth mentoring as corrective interventions, whether in response to a “Broken Britain” (Reeves, 2014) or as a “missing link” in rescuing children from poverty (APPG, 2012; Hagler et al., 2023). It also contrasts with problem-focused mentoring models that prioritise risk reduction targets, such as lowering aggression, and may therefore orient activities around correction rather than strengths (Cavell et al., 2021).

The findings support this flourishing-oriented framing. Mentors discussed their mentees’ inner development, including self-understanding, reflection, and openness, as valuable in themselves rather than only because they might lead to external outcomes. They also emphasised children’s strengths and repeatedly highlighted the value of strengths-identification activities such as cards representing strengths as animals, which they saw as improving children’s self-esteem and sense of self, while also motivating further growth (Abid & Ahmed, 2016; Seligman, 2019). A focus on strengths did not mean avoiding growth areas; rather, beginning with strengths appeared to create a safer and more motivating basis for honest self-evaluation and change. Children’s accounts echoed this. They described the programme as helping them recognise positive qualities in themselves, feel more confident and secure, and enjoy discovering aspects of who they are, not only as a basis for future improvement, but as valuable outcomes in themselves. Finally, Study 3 found a small but detectable reduction in self-evaluative distress, or low self-esteem, consistent with the qualitative pattern that strengths-oriented activities were experienced as beneficial for children’s self-esteem and sense of self.

8.1.2 Support for an expansive conceptualisation of character-focused mentoring

Second, this thesis makes the case for an expansive conceptualisation of character. This spans self-knowledge, growth mindset, goal setting, resilience, self-control, good judgement, and fairness, and draws on evidence-based practices within these areas. It contrasts both with narrower approaches to character, including those focused mainly on morality or achievement (Carr & Harrison, 2015; Lapsley & Yeager, 2012), and with narrow, targeted approaches to youth mentoring, such as the bilateral framework (Cavell et al., 2021). The findings support this expansive framing in three ways.

First, breadth enabled tailoring. Different curriculum domains, activities, and formats seemed particularly relevant for different dyads, suggesting that the programme’s breadth created opportunities for different entry points. For example, self-control appeared to meet a

particularly relevant need for some children and provided a clear focus for discussion and practice, while for others it was less immediately engaging. While the curriculum included certain core aspects, its breadth allowed mentors to draw on the activities and topics that were the best fit for their mentees, enabling different children to engage through different routes.

Second, breadth seemed to support a more holistic understanding of character. As discussed in Chapter 1, character education scholars often describe character as “plural,” meaning that it includes a range of interconnected personal qualities, strengths, and virtues that together form a person’s character (Kristjánsson, 2015; Park et al., 2017; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A curriculum built around seven complementary strengths fits this holistic framing. The findings supported this too: both children and mentors described the benefits of covering different but connected topics, while mentors saw children’s realisation of “how each part connects and is significant to our journey of self-development” as important signs that they were beginning to grasp the meaning of character growth.

Third, the findings appeared to support an approach that is expansive in that it uses the language of character but draws on psychological research, including SEL- and CBT-informed activities (see section 4.3.2). Mentors described the helpfulness of these activities focused on emotions, thoughts, actions, impulsive behaviour, and managing stress, while children described learning the concrete strategies that such activities targeted, including handling stress, responding to mistakes, and pausing and reflecting before acting. This is consistent with evidence that character development programmes are more effective when they target a broad range of psychosocial competencies (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007), perhaps because skills such as self-awareness and self-regulation support wider personal, social, emotional, and moral growth (Elias et al., 2014; Hatchimonji et al., 2022). It is also consistent with calls for character education to “psychologise” by engaging with more empirically rooted fields and evidence-based practice (Durlak et al., 2011; Elias et al., 2014; Kristjánsson et al., 2025; Lapsley & Yeager, 2012; Sokol et al., 2010).

8.1.3 Support for a PYD-grounded conceptualisation of character-focused mentoring

Finally, this thesis puts forward a conceptualisation of character-focused mentoring that is grounded in PYD. As shown in Part A of Figure 17, PYD provides the overarching framework that brings together the strength-based, developmental, ecological, person-context fit,

relational, agency-focused, practical, and social justice dimensions of this account. PYD shares with Aristotelian-inspired positive psychology a strength-based focus, while offering a developmental framework for understanding how young people grow. Two further features of PYD are especially important. The first is its ecological orientation, which understands young people as developing within wider networks of relationships, opportunities, and social conditions. The second is its practical focus on youth programming, which emphasises youth agency, supportive relationships, skill-building opportunities, and meaningful participation.

The findings align with PYD's ecological orientation (Lerner et al., 2015; Varga & Zaff, 2018). As represented in Part B of Figure 17, this means understanding mentoring not as a stand-alone intervention, but as embedded within children's wider lives, including peers, schools, families, communities, and social circumstances. Children's accounts suggested that mentoring was valuable partly because of these contexts. For example, some valued the space because they did not always feel they had adults to speak to elsewhere, while the Covid-period data suggested that reduced opportunities for connection increased the importance of mentoring as a relational space, reinforcing the importance of social context and fair access to relationships, opportunities, and resources in equity-oriented youth development (Lerner et al., 2021). The findings also demonstrated the value of embedding mentoring within peer and family networks. Children appreciated participating alongside friends, while mentor accounts suggested that peer and parental engagement gave mentors greater insight into children's everyday lives. From this perspective, mentoring can be framed both as a response to children's wider relational contexts and as a practice shaped by those contexts.

The findings also supported two principles that follow from this ecological orientation. First, they supported person-context fit, or the idea that support should fit the particular young person, in their particular context, at a particular time. Mentors and children repeatedly emphasised the importance of support tailored to children's preferences, strengths, needs, and circumstances, suggesting that "what works" often depends on fit rather than uniform programme exposure (Eccles, 1993). Second, they supported the RDS principle of relationism: the idea that development is shaped by the interaction of multiple relationships, activities, and contexts rather than by any single factor alone. Character growth was not described as emerging from the mentoring relationship or curriculum activities in isolation, but from how these interacted with other programme features and principles to support change (Bell, 2019; Overton, 2015).

From this perspective, the mentor can be understood as an *ecological asset*, meaning a person or resource that can support the child's growth within their wider environment. Character-focused mentoring can also be understood as an *adaptive person-context relation*, or *adaptive developmental regulation*: a reciprocal relationship between the child and their context that supports their growth while also changing in response to the child. This was visible in the findings in how children's responses, preferences, disclosures, and engagement shaped how mentors adapted their support, as well as in how mentors learned from mentees' perspectives, experiences, and ways of thinking (Erdem et al., 2016; Lerner et al., 2015; Overton, 2015; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

The findings also align with PYD's practical focus on youth programming. First, they support the PYD principles of agency and autonomy, which position young people as active participants in their own development rather than passive recipients of interventions (Larson, 2006; Lerner et al., 2015). Mentors described encouraging autonomy by inviting choice, building on children's interpretations, asking open-ended questions, avoiding "right answers," and supporting them to lead parts of the conversation. Children similarly valued having a say in who they worked with, being listened to and respected, and engaging in two-way dialogue. Second, the findings support PYD-oriented programme principles of sustained relationships, skill-building opportunities, and meaningful participation as foundations for positive development (Catalano et al., 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2004; Spencer et al., 2015). Both qualitative studies stressed the importance of close relationships alongside the translation of abstract ideas into lived practice: children and mentors described taking session content into everyday contexts through concrete strategies, reflection, and opportunities to apply learning in school, home, and peer situations. This supports the view of character-focused mentoring as a form of youth programming that combines supportive relationships, structured opportunities for skill-building, and youth agency, rather than relying on any one of these elements alone.

Taken together, these findings support conceptualising character-focused mentoring through a flourishing-oriented, expansive, PYD-grounded lens. Within this account, mentoring is not limited to addressing deficits within particular children, but is understood as a developmental resource whose significance is shaped by children's changing circumstances and access to relationships and opportunities. Character growth is therefore best understood as a holistic developmental process shaped by relationships, interactions, meaning making, and opportunities to practise, reflect, and grow within young people's real environments.

8.2 Outcomes associated with character-focused youth mentoring

One aim of this research was to clarify what character-focused youth mentoring is perceived to change, particularly given the modest and inconsistent outcomes reported in the mentoring literature. As summarised in Part D of Figure 17, the current findings suggest a coherent pattern of outcomes across mentors' longitudinal accounts and children's focus group reflections, with some support from the complementary pre-test/post-test control-group study. These relate to children's sense of self, self-understanding, everyday self-regulation, and thoughtfulness, broadly mirroring Rhodes' (2005) identity, social-emotional, and cognitive pathways (see section 3.2.1). The diary study also indicates that character-focused mentoring can support mentor development, with mentors describing parallel growth in self-reflection, confidence, and interpersonal skills.

Across both qualitative studies, mentors and children consistently described changes in children's self-confidence and sense of self. Mentors described mentees becoming more confident and self-accepting over time, while children placed particular emphasis on feeling more able to be "their own self" and to feel proud of who they are. This was reinforced by Study 3, which found a small reduction in low self-esteem to be the only detectable group-level outcome among participants compared with the control group. Beyond self-esteem and confidence, the qualitative findings also highlighted growth in self-awareness and identity articulation. Children described becoming better able to think about who they are and articulate their strengths and growth areas, while mentors described mentees becoming more reflective about what they knew about themselves. These findings align with previous research linking mentoring to improvements in self-worth and identity development (Raposa et al., 2019b) and with Rhodes' identity-development pathway, which conceptualises mentoring as supporting a stronger and more secure sense of self (DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2005).

Within this broader identity-related pattern, children also appeared to improve in their ability to reflect honestly on their limitations. Mentors in particular highlighted growth in vulnerability, willingness to acknowledge difficulty, ask for help, and engage with growth-oriented activities. While previous mentoring research has described the relationship as a potential safe space for increased self-awareness and emotional openness (Spencer, 2006a), vulnerability is rarely foregrounded as a developmental outcome in mentoring evaluation. The present findings therefore suggest that character-focused mentoring may foster not only

confidence and identity articulation, but also the ability to recognise limitations honestly and remain open to growth. This matters developmentally because openness and self-disclosure can strengthen relational closeness and support-seeking, while awareness and acknowledgement of difficulty are widely recognised precursors to change (Costello et al., 2024; Raihan & Cogburn, 2023). It also has methodological implications: as children become more self-aware, they may evaluate themselves more critically, which can complicate the interpretation of self-report measures even where underlying competence is improving (Deutsch et al., 2017; Duckworth & Yeager, 2015).

Children and mentors also described gains in social-emotional outcomes, including everyday self-regulation and coping. Children emphasised learning strategies for handling stress, managing negative thoughts, pausing before acting, and regulating emotions and behaviour. Mentors further described growth in relational strengths, including empathy, perspective-taking, and openness. These findings align with Rhodes' (2005) social-emotional pathway and with previous work showing that mentoring can support coping skills, emotion regulation, prosocial skills, and general psychosocial functioning (DeWit et al., 2016; Raposa et al., 2019b). Alongside these individual-level changes, both qualitative studies suggested that belonging and peer connection within the wider mentoring group could function as outcomes in their own right. Children described a cohesive, "family-like" community, while mentors observed improved relationships within the group. This is again consistent with previous group mentoring research (Dowd et al., 2015; Kupersmidt et al., 2020).

Finally, both qualitative studies suggested growth in children's thoughtful and practical judgement. Children described becoming more intentional about goals, daily routines, thinking before acting, considering consequences, and relating character strengths to everyday life. Mentors similarly described children becoming more thoughtful and reflective, including developing an understanding of why reflection itself matters. These shifts align with Rhodes' cognitive-development pathway, which links mentoring to improved cognitive functioning and information processing (Luo & Stoeger, 2023; Rhodes, 2005), and with research suggesting that mentoring can support self-monitoring, reflection, goal setting, and perspective-taking (Deutsch et al., 2017; Núñez et al., 2013). They are also closely tied to metacognition, meta-learning, and practical wisdom. These are capacities involving noticing, evaluating, and regulating one's thoughts, emotions, behaviour, and use of strengths in context, considered to be a key aim across character education efforts (CCR, 2024; Fadel, 2015; JCCV, 2024; Kristjánsson, 2010, 2023; Sale, 2020).

Importantly, the outcomes associated with participation were not limited to children. Alongside observing mentee growth, mentors described parallel shifts in their own self-reflection, confidence, listening, patience, and ability to meet people where they are. They often linked this to completing curriculum activities alongside mentees, practising empathy and attentive listening, and learning from mentees' perspectives. These findings are consistent with evidence that mentoring can benefit mentors as well as mentees (Weiler et al., 2013), and with broader framings of mentoring as a mutually developmental relationship rather than a one-way intervention (Preston et al., 2019). In the current study, mentors also described professional gains, including strengthened problem-solving, communication, and adaptability. At the same time, mentors' growth in patience, empathy, confidence, and listening capacity may have shaped the quality and consistency of support that children received. This reinforces the thesis's framing of mentoring as a relational, co-constructed process, aligned with PYD's emphasis on reciprocity (Lerner et al., 2015; Overton, 2015) and with social justice mentoring frameworks that challenge "giver-receiver" assumptions by reframing mentoring as reciprocal learning rather than one-way transfer of knowledge (Hagler, 2020; Liang et al., 2013).

8.3 Mechanisms of change in character-focused mentoring

Building on the outcomes described above, this thesis also contributes to ongoing debates about the mechanisms behind how character-focused mentoring may facilitate development. Although previous mentoring research has identified positive outcomes and highlighted the importance of relationship quality, it has offered less fine-grained insight into what happens within mentoring interactions to support change, particularly when relational mentoring is combined with structured, character-focused curriculum content (see Chapter 3). The pattern of outcomes described above broadly aligns with Rhodes' developmental model, which proposes that mentoring relationships may influence young people through identity, social-emotional, and cognitive pathways (Rhodes, 2005; DuBois et al., 2011). While this is a helpful framework, it does not fully answer the question of *how* these changes come about in a relational, character-focused, PYD-grounded mentoring setting.

Drawing directly on mentors' diaries and children's focus group accounts, the current findings point to three interacting processes that appeared to facilitate these pathways in this programme:

openness, trust, and relational support; structured curriculum activities; and guided autonomy and applied practice. These processes are summarised in Part C of Figure 17. The processes also partly map onto classic character education pathways of character being “caught,” “taught,” and “sought” (see section 1.1.3; Allen & Rhind, 2019; Birdwell et al., 2015; JCCV, 2024). Although these processes are discussed separately for clarity, the findings suggest that they did not operate as separate components with isolated effects. Rather, they appeared most powerful when combined, with each reinforcing the others.

8.3.1 Openness, trust, and growth through relational support

First, growth appeared to be facilitated through relational support, particularly through the development of openness and trust. In the qualitative findings, openness seemed to function not only as an indicator of relationship quality, but as a possible mechanism through which mentoring became impactful. Mentors repeatedly described prioritising attentive listening, attunement, care, and authenticity in order to build trust (see sections 5.2.1.1 and 5.2.1.2; hereafter cited by section number only). They emphasised the importance of checking in and connecting before engaging in activities, as well as of being open and authentic themselves, laughing together, and allowing the relationship to feel natural. They saw these practices as helping children feel safe enough to open up about their lives. Children similarly emphasised that mentors were “there for you” and “somebody you could trust,” valued companionship, mutuality, laughter, and shared enjoyment, and described the relief of being able to talk through problems, insecurities, conflict, and loss, including sharing things they would not usually say elsewhere (6.2.1.1). These patterns in the data are consistent with evidence that relationship quality and mentor attunement facilitate emotional safety and are central to mentoring effectiveness (Lester et al., 2019; Pryce et al., 2018; Spencer et al., 2023). Participants’ emphasis on both support through personal difficulty, listening, and trust, as well as ease through humour, games, trips, cooking, baking, and play also maps onto Goldner and Ben-Eliyahu’s (2021) emotional and recreational components of high-quality mentoring relationships.

While the benefits of this closeness and trust depend on clear boundaries and supported endings, particularly where relationships feel “friend-like” (see discussion in section 6.3.1; Keller et al., 2025; Rhodes, 2020), the current findings support the wider mentoring literature that positions

relationship quality as a core driver of mentoring impact. First, through providing a space of uninterrupted listening, care, and empathy, mentors appeared to model these qualities to mentees, who they described as reciprocating such care and empathy toward them and others in the group (5.2.3.4). Second, the affective benefits of children's disclosure and responsive listening are consistent with evidence that opening up about difficult experiences and being heard can improve wellbeing, acceptance, a sense of self, and emotional regulation (Ahrens et al., 2011; Brummelman et al., 2014; Pennebaker, 2012). Third, openness, often emerging from ease and connection, appeared to become a gateway to more personalised and responsive support. By giving mentors access to the child's lived context and inner world, it enabled emotional and practical support that was relevant to the child's needs, identity concerns, and everyday dilemmas (5.2.1.2 and 6.2.1.2; Kiadarbandsari, 2025). Fourth, mentors' own openness, authenticity, and willingness to share appropriate experiences appeared to shape the relational climate of mentoring. By modelling reflection, vulnerability, and growth, and by engaging jointly in activities and shared challenges, mentors may have helped children experience guidance as collaborative rather than imposed, increasing the likelihood that they would take it up and carry it beyond the session (Li & Julian, 2012; Raposa et al., 2019b; Rhodes, 2005).

Importantly, these elements also appeared to reinforce one another (Lester et al., 2019; Spencer et al., 2023). For example, care and relational safety may facilitate disclosure, disclosure may enable tailored emotional and practical support, and effective support may strengthen trust and safety, increasing the likelihood of further disclosure. This reciprocal pattern was visible in the current findings. Mentors described increased openness and vulnerability over time as both an outcome of the mentoring relationship and a condition for deeper curriculum engagement and understanding (5.2.1.1, 5.2.2.1, and 5.2.3.1). Children similarly described feeling increasingly comfortable talking as the relationship progressed, while also showing increasing engagement with the challenging nature of incremental character growth (6.2.1.1 and 6.2.2.4).

This suggests that the space created through mentoring was not simply a "safe space" in the sense of being free from discomfort, difficulty, or challenge, but closer to what Arao and Clemens (2013) describe as a "brave space": a context in which participants are prepared to engage honestly with potentially difficult material and grow, rather than equating safety with comfort. This framework, developed in relation to social justice dialogue, may be particularly

useful here because character growth is not easy and requires more than reassurance. Children needed to feel sufficiently secure and supported to speak honestly about worries, mistakes, conflict, and insecurity, while also being gently encouraged to reflect, take ownership, and try out new ways of thinking and acting beyond the session.

Ultimately, the mentoring relationship appeared to become a key developmental context, partly overlapping with the character education pathway of character being “caught.” In character education, this refers to the idea that character is learned through everyday interactions, emotional norms, ethos, role-modelling, and the felt experience of being treated with respect and care (Birdwell et al., 2015; JCCV, 2024). Youth mentoring may be especially well placed for this because, as a relational intervention, it provides a space in which children can receive sustained attention, responsive listening, care, and tailored support, while also observing their mentor’s openness, reflection, and vulnerability. This suggests that character education may benefit from engaging more closely with youth mentoring, where character can be supported through close, supportive relationships.

In blended settings, this openness, relational support, and the “caught” pathway may also operate at the group level. In the current findings, mentors described group interactions and norms as fostering openness, closeness, and empathy among mentees, while children described experiencing group belonging, peer interaction, multiple mentoring ties, and shared group norms. These group-level processes can reinforce safety, model prosocial conduct, and scaffold openness beyond the dyad (5.2.4.3 and 6.2.1.3; see also the discussion of vertical and horizontal relationships in section 6.3.2; Hartup, 1989; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). The point here is that character may have been “caught” not only in the one-to-one relationship or only in the wider group, but that both relational spaces could contribute to the developmental climate of the programme. Within this climate, mentors may contribute to children’s identity development, emotion regulation, and reflective thinking by modelling openness, care, and reflectiveness, creating a space in which children can be heard and externalise experience, and providing guidance grounded in children’s own lives (Raposa et al., 2019b; Rhodes, 2006).

8.3.2 Targeted activities and growth through structured curriculum content

Second, growth appeared to be facilitated through engagement with targeted activities and structured curriculum content. In the current findings, mentors frequently attributed children's learning and growth to specific character-focused, flourishing-oriented activities, while children's accounts of what they learned closely reflected the topics and practical strategies in the curriculum (5.2.2.2 and 6.2.2). This does not suggest that the activities would necessarily have had the same effect on their own. Rather, it suggests that structured content gave mentors and children a shared focus, language, and set of tools through which character-related reflection and growth could be supported within the mentoring relationship. This aligns with calls for mentoring models to move beyond purely friendship-based approaches and integrate structured, skill-building activities (Christensen et al., 2020; Luo & Stoeger, 2023; Lyons et al., 2019), particularly when these are flourishing-oriented, personally relevant, and adapted through a responsive mentoring relationship.

The mechanism suggested here is twofold. First, the curriculum provided concrete tools and language that supported children's understanding of, and engagement with, character-related concepts. Mentors described how structured activities introduced language for strengths and processes that children may already have experienced or practised but had not necessarily recognised explicitly (5.2.3.1). They also described how these activities helped children identify strengths, make sense of emotions, and practise strategies for pausing, thinking, and regulating behaviour (5.2.3.1 to 5.2.3.4). Children similarly described learning to understand character, regulate emotions, manage stress, handle mistakes, and translate wishes into structured plans (6.2.2.1 and 6.2.2.2). In other words, the topics and strategies covered in the curriculum appeared in participants' own accounts of what was learned and taken forward. This pattern is consistent with evidence from positive psychology, CBT, and SEL research showing that structured, skills-based activities can support school-age children's strengths-identification, emotion regulation, coping, and goal-directed behaviour (e.g., Bierman et al., 2010; Character Lab, 2026; Neenan, 2017; Riggs et al., 2006; Seligman et al., 2005).

Importantly, however, the findings suggest that the value of structured content did not lie in the tasks alone, but in how mentors brought them to life. While the activities introduced meaningful topics and prompts, both mentors and children emphasised the importance of personalised support in how they were delivered (5.2.1.2 and 6.2.1.2). Mentors adapted explanations,

examples, and formats to children's needs, preferences, and developmental level, and connected concepts to children's real situations using concrete examples from their personal lives, including school, home, and friendships, to make topics understandable and relevant (5.2.1.2, 5.2.2.2, and 6.2.1.2). This is where mentoring may add something distinctive to character education: while teachers can adapt material at the level of a class, mentors can personalise discussion around one child's experiences, interests, questions, and circumstances. In this sense, mentors acted as translators between curriculum content and children's lived contexts, helping children move from abstract character concepts to concrete strategies that could be recognised, discussed, and practised in everyday life.

Second, curriculum activities functioned as a relational scaffold. In the current findings, structured prompts and activities created openings for personal discussion and relationship-building (5.2.2.2). They gave mentors and children something shared to do and talk about, reducing uncertainty about what to do next while also creating space to share personal stories, worries, and dilemmas. This allowed mentors to respond with empathy, guidance, and tailored support. It also enabled mentors to share appropriate examples from their own lives and complete activities alongside children, facilitating a sense of partnership and cooperation. In this way, structured activities contributed not only to skill-building but also to deepening the mentoring relationship. This is consistent with evidence that thriving-oriented activities connected to children's lived experience can strengthen young people's perceived support from adults (DuBois & Keller, 2017), and suggests that such targeted activities may be best understood not as competing with the relationship, but as structuring and enhancing it by giving pairs a shared, safe focus for conversation and increasing the likelihood of personal disclosure and tailored guidance (Lyons et al., 2019).

Again, this appears to be a two-way, self-reinforcing mechanism, as the effectiveness of curriculum activities also depended on relational closeness. The findings suggest that listening, checking in, laughing, playing games, and developing a close, natural relationship were important prerequisites for successful curriculum engagement, particularly with "the more hard-hitting topics" (5.2.2.1 and 6.2.1.1). Once comfort and trust were established, children were more willing to open up about their own character in response to prompts. This enabled mentors to better guide children through the activities, adapt concepts to their developmental level, language, and circumstances, and help them engage more deeply and participate more

actively. Therefore, alongside directly contributing to growth (as discussed in section 8.3.1), relationship quality made the curriculum come alive by making structured activities feel safe, relevant, and personally meaningful. This is in line with clinical evidence that relational alliance can strengthen engagement with structured change processes (Cronin et al., 2015; Gabbard, 2014).

This process adds insight to the character education notion of character being “taught,” which refers to the explicit teaching of character through instruction, discussion, reflection, and structured activities (Allen & Rhind, 2019; JCCV, 2024). The findings suggest that explicit character education may be most effective when it occurs within a relational context marked by emotional safety, naturalness, and trust, and when adults are able to translate structured content into developmentally appropriate examples connected to children’s lived experience. In other words, character was not simply taught through curriculum delivery, but through relationally mediated instruction, in which structured activities, mentor responsiveness, and children’s lived experiences came together.

These findings also contribute to the youth mentoring literature by extending Lyons et al.’s (2019) “sweet spot” argument. Lyons et al. found that mentoring outcomes were strongest when relational closeness was combined with instrumental activities such as goal setting and feedback, and called for closer attention to what actually occurs within mentor-mentee interactions that incorporate structure (see section 3.5.3). The current findings add to this process-level detail through exploring a more content-rich form of structured activity: a character-focused curriculum. They show how structured curriculum content and relationship quality may reinforce one another in practice. The curriculum gave mentors and children a shared language, tasks, and safe prompts for personal discussion; mentors used relational closeness to translate this content into children’s lived contexts and support engagement with more challenging topics; and the resulting disclosure, guidance, and shared reflection deepened the relationship itself. Importantly, this balance appeared dynamic rather than fixed: mentors had to read children’s cues and shift between structure, responsiveness, and emotional support depending on the child’s needs, the topic, and the moment. This suggests that structured activities may function both as mechanisms of skill-building and as scaffolds for relational depth, but only when flexibly embedded within a responsive mentoring relationship.

Overall, this process suggests that children's growth was supported not by either relationship quality or structured curriculum content alone, but by their dynamic interplay. This is consistent with a PYD and RDS lens, which emphasises not the relative weight of isolated intervention components, but how relationships, activities, and contexts interact over time to co-create developmental change (Lerner et al., 2015; Overton, 2013).

8.3.3 Growth through guided autonomy, intentionality, and applied practice

Third, growth appeared to be supported by mentoring interactions that helped children take up and apply character content beyond the session. Whereas the previous section focused on the role of structured curriculum content within mentoring sessions, this process considers how that content was delivered and taken up more broadly: through autonomy-supportive, collaborative, and application-focused mentoring interactions.

First, both mentors and children highlighted the importance of incrementally increasing children's autonomy, independent thinking, and ownership. In diary entries, this was visible in mentors' reflections on inviting choice, building on children's interpretations, supporting children to reach their own conclusions, modelling vulnerability, and setting shared goals and challenges (5.2.1.3 and 5.2.2.2). In focus groups, it was reflected in children's emphasis on mutuality, partnership, and choice, as well as in their appreciation of mentors who avoided simply giving "the answer" and instead supported deeper reflection (6.2.1.1, 6.2.1.2, and 6.2.1.3). The mechanism proposed here involves a combination of autonomy support, reflection, internalisation, and practice: when children are treated as active partners and given space to develop their own thinking, they may be more likely to engage with content, take ownership of goals and strategies, and apply learning beyond the session (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Weinstein et al., 2012).

In the diary findings, mentors emphasised validating children's perspectives, including "listening more as opposed to always talking" as relationships progressed, alongside asking open-ended questions, avoiding prescribing "correct answers," building around children's interpretations, and treating disclosure as the child's choice (5.2.1.2 and 5.2.1.3). This was echoed in the focus group data, where children valued having a say in who they worked with, engaging in two-way dialogue, and being able to lead parts of the conversation (6.2.1.1 and 6.2.1.3; Keller et al., 2026; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021; Spencer et al., 2019). While these

practices must be held within ethical and developmental scaffolds (see discussion of this in section 5.3.2.3), they align with established autonomy-supportive teaching strategies (Davis & McQuillin, 2022) and with pedagogical accounts suggesting that critical thinking and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) are supported when young people engage in open-ended, two-way discussion rather than being steered towards “right answers” (Larsson et al., 2016; Legault, 2016; Whitlock, 2024).

Mentors’ self-disclosure and appropriate sharing of their own mistakes and learning also appeared to support this process (5.2.1.1). This seemed to do two things. One, it made abstract concepts concrete, modelled reflection, and normalised grappling with character strengths in practice. Two, it reduced hierarchy in the relationship. Across the qualitative data, sessions were described as working best when they felt like teamwork, with children especially valuing relationships that felt respectful, reciprocal, and more friend-like than other adult-child relationships (5.2.1.3 and 6.2.1.1). This sense of partnership was especially pronounced when mentors and children set shared goals and “challenged each other” to apply the strengths in practice (5.2.2.2). Such practices are consistent with mentoring research emphasising mutuality and bidirectional support as ways in which young people internalise ways of thinking and develop engagement, self-efficacy, ownership, and agency (Davis & McQuillin, 2022; Larsson et al., 2016; Lester et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2022).

Second, curriculum-prompted discussions appeared to support children’s intentionality, goal setting, and agency. Both mentors and children described how discussions about goals, obstacles, priorities, routines, consequences, and the relevance of character strengths to everyday life prompted children to become more reflective, thoughtful, and purposeful (5.2.3.2, 5.2.3.3, and 6.2.2.2). Alongside the importance of curriculum prompts which opened such discussions, what appeared key here was the mentor’s role as a guide who helped children connect character-related topics to their specific circumstances. Children described how these conversations helped them gain new perspectives on everyday situations, think more carefully about their actions, and shift from “just going on” autopilot behaviour towards greater deliberation, intentionality, agency, and purposeful action, including a sense of being able to shape one’s actions and future.

Third, the findings point towards growth in capacities that appeared central to initiating and sustaining change over time. Children described how structured activities helped them learn tools to regulate emotions, pause and think, control their actions, and follow through on goals in the service of longer-term aims (6.2.2.1 and 6.2.2.2; Arthur et al., 2015; Gross, 2015). Across both qualitative studies, children also appeared to grow in self-awareness, metacognition, and meta-learning: recognising their limitations, becoming more willing to engage with difficulty, admitting when things were hard, asking for help, and taking small, incremental steps grounded in real life (5.2.3.2, 5.2.3.3, and 6.2.2.4). Previous research has linked self-awareness and metacognition not only to the integration of character and greater security in one's sense of self (Rowe, 2023), but also to self-monitoring, regulation, ethical adherence, awareness of others, and agency (Astuti & Rozikin, 2024; Sibarani, 2024; Siegel, 2010).

Together, these practices appeared to support applied growth by increasing children's ownership over goals and decisions while strengthening their capacity to follow through. Across the qualitative studies, participants repeatedly described the translation of session content into everyday lived practice (5.2.3.2, 6.2.2.1, 6.2.2.2, and 6.2.2.4). Mentors, who viewed the effectiveness of the programme as depending on whether children could apply its topics to their lives, described mentees carrying out goals "in action" and applying character strengths in other areas of life. Children similarly described transferring strengths to new contexts, including friendships, emotional regulation at home, and conflicts with siblings. This emphasis on active pursuit and application aligns with the character education pathway of character being "sought," in which strengths are developed through applied practice and habituation in everyday life (JCCV, 2024; Kristjánsson, 2015; MacIntyre, 1981).

Importantly, this mechanism also appeared mutually reinforcing. Open-ended, respectful, two-way dialogue, joint practice, and shared challenges helped children engage more deeply in activities and explore goals, routines, decisions, and character strengths in ways that supported ownership and application in their broader lives. At the same time, these processes were strengthened by closer mentoring relationships. A more "natural" relationship made free-flowing, autonomy-supportive conversation easier and enabled mentors to personalise content to children's lives and support autonomy in ways that did not feel forced. Equally, applied activities may have further strengthened the relationship. Joint challenges reinforced a sense of partnership (5.2.2.2), while mentors' pride and sense of reward when seeing children apply the strengths may have deepened their investment in the mentoring process (5.2.3.2).

These findings also enrich the youth mentoring literature by supporting and extending Goldner and Ben-Eliyahu's (2021) account of high-quality mentoring relationships as comprising emotional, recreational, and promoting-catalysing components (see section 3.5.2). In the current findings, the processes related to relational support (i.e., section 8.3.1) map onto the emotional and recreational components. Specifically, listening, validation, trust, and care reflect the former, while humour, play, and a natural, friend-like relationship reflect the latter. Targeted activities (i.e., section 8.3.2), as well as autonomy support and application (this section), map onto the promoting-catalysing component. The current qualitative findings add three further insights. First, they provide an account of the promoting-catalysing component in practice, encompassing specific processes related to increasing youth autonomy, agency, intentionality, and metacognition, alongside supporting application. Second, they suggest that a structured character-focused curriculum can provide concrete content, language, and practices through which promoting-catalysing work is enacted. Third, they show that the three components may not operate separately. In the current findings, the first two components, emotional safety and recreational ease, appeared to create the conditions for children to engage in autonomy-supportive, character-focused growth work. The third component, promoting-catalysing activities, which included shared goals and practical challenges, strengthened children's sense of partnership, mutuality, and relational closeness. This suggests that character-focused mentoring may support applied growth through the dynamic integration of emotional, recreational, and promoting-catalysing processes.

Overall, this pathway illustrates how specific processes and mentoring interactions in character-focused mentoring may come together to help children grow in their autonomy, intentionality, and ability to translate abstract ideas into specific, thought-through, applied steps grounded in their everyday lives. As above, this reflects a PYD and RDS lens by illustrating how multiple factors interact to co-create greater ownership, reflectiveness, and applied change (Lerner et al., 2015; Overton, 2013).

8.4 Implications for practice in character-focused mentoring

The findings of this research, and in particular the mechanisms identified above, have direct implications for practice. They translate into five recommendations for mentoring programmes that seek to support children's character growth and Positive Youth Development (PYD),

suggesting that effectiveness in character-focused mentoring may depend on the combined effect of these interacting processes: (1) building close bonds while maintaining boundaries and planning endings; (2) incorporating structured activities while preserving informal relational connection; (3) tailoring content to individual children while maintaining fidelity to core programme mechanisms; (4) increasing youth agency through guided autonomy and supported application; and (5) embedding mentoring within children's wider relational ecologies where feasible. On the whole, these implications are derived from interpretations of the qualitative findings in light of the wider mentoring literature.

Two cross-cutting principles flow from these recommendations and should shape how they are implemented. First, they place substantial demands on mentors, who are expected to balance warmth with boundaries, structure with responsiveness, fidelity with adaptation, and youth agency with developmental scaffolding, while integrating all of these processes together. Programmes therefore need to prioritise mentor support and training. This may include regular check-ins, reflective spaces, and supervision to reduce burnout risk, support wellbeing, help mentors process difficulties, provide guidance, and sustain consistent, high-quality practice over time (Bufali et al., 2023; Keller et al., 2023). Second, these recommendations should be implemented in ways that are attentive to social justice principles, given the histories of both youth mentoring and character education in reproducing paternalistic, deficit-based, and individualising assumptions. I return to this point after outlining the five recommendations.

A first implication is that programmes should support mentors to build close, supportive bonds characterised by trust. Children most strongly valued being listened to, feeling safe, and “not alone,” while mentors described deliberate practices of attunement and remembering details to build trust. The practical implication is that mentor preparation should include training in the relational practices that featured repeatedly across both qualitative studies. These include opening sessions with check-ins before tasks, active and uninterrupted listening, and following up on details from previous conversations (Pryce et al., 2018; REACH, 2019). Furthermore, given that mentors in the current diary study described using appropriate self-disclosure, humour, and “friend-like” ease to foster openness, and this was especially valued by children in focus groups, training should explicitly address how to be authentic without collapsing roles, including how to decide what to share, when to share it, and how to keep disclosures mentee-serving rather than mentor-serving (Liang et al., 2002; Pryce, 2012; Spencer, 2006b). Notably, the Covid-period findings also suggest that relational depth is achievable online, although

mentors and children generally experienced in-person contact as more natural and easier for sustaining engagement (see Study 1 Covid themes; section 5.2.4).

However, the same findings also show that closeness does not come without risks. Children's "older sister" and "best friend" metaphors, sadness at endings, and the risk of blurred expectations point to the need for boundary clarity, safeguarding processes, and planned closure as part of programme design (Keller et al., 2025; Rhodes, 2020; Varga & Zaff, 2018). The practical implication is not to discourage warmth and authenticity, but to support mentors to be genuine while remaining alert to children's developmental needs, histories, and vulnerabilities. As discussed in section 6.3.1, this includes practising *anticipatory empathy*, defined as remaining emotionally present while holding in mind how mentors' actions, disclosures, relational style, and eventual endings may affect the child (Jordan, 1999; Spencer, 2006b). Programmes should therefore provide training, supervision, and reflective spaces where mentors can consider how to apply this, process boundary dilemmas, plan endings well, and receive emotional support for the demanding work of being attuned, boundaried, and reliable over time (Larose et al., 2019; Lester et al., 2019; Pryce, 2012; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017).

Second, programmes should integrate structured, skill-building curriculum activities into mentoring and train mentors to use these activities as relational and developmental tools rather than as tasks to complete. Mentors and children repeatedly linked children's growth to the application of specific activities and strategies, including regulating emotion, goal setting, and thinking before acting, and mentors described the curriculum as both an instructional and a relational scaffold. The current findings therefore strengthen the case for integrating targeted activities into mentoring (Christensen et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 2019), while also clarifying that, in this programme, structured activities involved a full character-focused curriculum with concepts, language, activities, and strategies that mentors and children could work through together. Mentors described actively aiming for a "healthy balance" between casual conversation and growth-focused discussion, and children valued both the friend-like ease of "hanging out" and the mentor's greater experience and practical help, both with curriculum tasks and beyond. A natural relationship supported openness and engagement with more personal prompts, while structured activities created a shared focus that made deeper, tailored conversation easier. Furthermore, integrating structured curricula may also make school-based mentoring programmes more attractive to school partners, as this may align mentoring to clear learning aims.

Practically, this implies that programmes need both a usable set of structured activities and mentor preparation in how to deliver them well. The current research suggests that activities should be strength-based and personally meaningful, with built-in space for application. Mentor preparation should then focus on how to balance informal connection, emotional support, structured conversation, and autonomy support, and how to use activities as scaffolds for connection, reflection, and application rather than simply as tasks to complete. Specific training may focus on how to open sessions with connection, when and how to pivot into curriculum prompts, and when to let conversation flow freely. It can also focus on how to support internalisation, ownership, and application by translating content into children's lived contexts, identifying concrete actions for practice outside the session, noticing when structured work is becoming mechanical or when free-flowing talk is drifting away from learning, and adjusting accordingly (Christensen et al., 2020; DuBois & Keller, 2017; Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Luo & Stoeger, 2023; Lyons et al., 2019).

Third, programmes should explicitly prepare mentors for the role of personal translator and guide, able to meet the child where they are and adapt concepts to children's developmental level, language, and context while maintaining the integrity of evidence-informed tools. In line with the PYD principles of individuality, adaptability, and person-context fit (Lerner et al., 2015), mentors repeatedly described simplifying tasks, changing explanations, and building around mentees' interpretations, while children valued both flexibility in format and mentors connecting topics to their real problems and lives. This kind of tailored delivery not only made character concepts engaging and understandable, but also made them specific to children's unique contexts, reflecting the ecological emphasis that runs through this thesis (Bowers et al., 2015). In practice, this is where implementation often hinges, as character content can remain abstract if it is not rendered concrete, connected to children's lived experience, and situationally applicable. It is also where the personalised nature of one-to-one mentoring may be particularly impactful.

This has implications both for programme design and mentor training. Programme materials should be designed with adaptation in mind, for example by including varied examples, flexible formats, and prompts that invite connection to children's own experiences. However, no curriculum can anticipate every child, moment, or context, so mentors also need training in how to assess a child's level of understanding and adjust language and format in real time, for

example by offering different examples or metaphors and games, drawing, or speaking instead of writing. Training should also cover how to connect structured activities and prompts to concrete examples from the child's world. Mentors in the current research became more effective at this as they developed a deeper understanding of what worked for their mentees. One key skill they developed was learning to read cues and adjust their plan accordingly in the moment, suggesting that the "sweet spot" between structure and responsiveness may be dynamic rather than fixed across time and situations (Lyons et al., 2019). Importantly, this cannot come at the expense of fidelity to programme aims and activities (see discussion in section 5.3.2.3). Therefore, programmes should support mentors to effectively tailor format without compromising the underlying evidence basis of structured curriculum activities. Practically, this may involve giving mentors clarity on which elements are "core" (the underlying principle or mechanism a task is meant to build) versus what can be adapted (examples, pacing, format, order), and using supervision or reflective spaces to work through real cases where mentors are unsure whether they are maintaining the integrity of the curriculum activities. This can support delivery that balances flexibility with fidelity and helps mentors develop the judgement to navigate these tensions (Davis & McQuillin, 2022; Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Legault, 2016; Luo & Stoeger, 2023).

Fourth, beyond tailoring content to children's needs, programmes should incorporate practices that give children meaningful agency in how they engage with, interpret, and apply character content. Autonomy-supportive practices, such as inviting choice, encouraging disagreement, asking open-ended questions, modelling vulnerability, engaging in mutual support, framing sessions as teamwork, and gradually increasing opportunities for children to lead conversations, resonated with children's strong emphasis on mutuality, respect, and freedom within the programme, including within the group setting. This aligns with evidence that autonomy-supportive relationships which engage with the whole person increase active participation, internalisation, ownership, and self-regulation, and therefore make it more likely that strategies translate into lived practice rather than remaining externally endorsed "right answers" (Davis & McQuillin, 2022; Weinstein et al., 2012). It is also in line with social justice mentoring frameworks which emphasise youth voice and reciprocity (Hagler, 2020; Kuperminc et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2019), as well as the PYD premise that development requires autonomy, agency, and independent thinking (Bowers et al., 2015; Reilly & Narvaez, 2018; Tolan et al., 2016).

At the same time, the findings highlight an implementation tension in this approach. Mentors described challenges in giving autonomy when engagement dropped or distraction increased, and one account suggested that mentee-led interpretations may at times diverge from healthy or evidence-backed strategies. As discussed in section 5.3.2.3, the practical recommendation is therefore to incrementally introduce *guided autonomy*, understood as open, respectful dialogue that engages with the whole person and is held within ethical and developmental scaffolds and a clear flourishing orientation. This allows children to take ownership while still being supported toward constructive strategies (Kristjánsson, 2013; Seligman, 2011; Tolan et al., 2016). Practically, mentoring programmes can support this by incorporating evidence-based frameworks and curriculum activities. Because both mentor and mentee engage with the curriculum together, lessons need not be framed as coming from the mentor's authority alone, which may help preserve a sense of partnership and reduce a giver-receiver dynamic. Programmes can also train mentors to scaffold choice and disagreement without withdrawing direction, for example by offering bounded options and linking conclusions back to the underlying principle in the curriculum, while ensuring oversight at the programme level. In this way, youth voice and flexibility can remain learning-oriented and application-promoting (Davis & McQuillin, 2022; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014).

Fifth, reflecting the ecological framing in Part B of Figure 17, programmes should move beyond a purely dyadic approach by situating mentoring within children's wider relational contexts. As discussed earlier, children's and mentors' accounts suggested that mentoring was often valued in relation to broader social conditions, including limited access to other trusted people and, during Covid-19, the disruption of usual sources of social connection. Beyond recognising these contexts, the practical implication here is that programmes should design mentoring in ways that work with and strengthen children's wider networks of support. Two routes appear particularly important: (1) designing blended formats that connect children with peers and multiple supportive adults, and (2) creating appropriate links with families and trusted adults beyond the programme. This aligns with ecological accounts of mentoring as embedded within children's broader networks of relationships (Varga & Zaff, 2018).

One practical route for embedding mentoring within children's ecologies is a blended (i.e., group and one-to-one) format. Across both qualitative studies, participants expressed support for this model. Children emphasised the added value of taking part alongside friends,

experiencing a family-like community, drawing on multiple mentors, and moving flexibly between one-to-one time, small-group work, and whole-group activities. This flexibility seemed to increase comfort and continuity, particularly where the one-to-one mentoring relationship felt less natural or where children benefited from having familiar peers and other mentors available. It also broadened access to supportive adults in ways that align with ecological and PYD accounts of development as grounded in webs of relationships and multiple developmental assets (Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner et al., 2015; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Varga & Zaff, 2018). This may be a distinctive strength of the blended model: support is not located only in one mentor-mentee relationship, but distributed across a small relational community. Because children know one another outside the programme, this group context may also leave behind peer connections and shared experiences that remain available after formal mentoring ends.

Mentors similarly emphasised the value of the group. The only concern they raised about mentoring in a group setting was that this could weaken relational quality if children did not have enough privacy within one-to-one time, suggesting a need for separate, quieter spaces where children can speak openly without fear of being overheard. Otherwise, mentors described peer interaction as encouraging engagement and attributed some growth in interpersonal strengths, such as empathy, perspective-taking, and openness, to children practising these qualities within a wider peer setting. They also noted that seeing children interact with friends provided relational insight that helped them better understand their mentees. Finally, mentors described learning from mentoring alongside other pairs, including observing different mentoring styles and giving and receiving support from other mentors. Given the substantial demands these implications place on mentors, this mentor-to-mentor contact may be an under-recognised strength of blended formats, offering informal check-ins, shared problem-solving, reassurance, feelings of support, and some protection against burnout across a long programme.

Importantly, the findings also highlight the importance of skilled facilitation in blended mentoring. Children valued a positive group culture characterised by inside jokes, spontaneous play, and flexible configuration. However, while not explicitly discussed by participants here, such flexibility does not run itself and, when unmanaged, may drift into distraction, chaos, or uneven access. The practical implication is that programmes using blended formats should treat facilitation as a core part of implementation and equip a coordinator or leader to balance structure and spontaneity, sustain norms of respect and confidentiality, manage conflict, and

ensure that flexibility remains constructive (see discussion in section 6.3.2; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014; Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021).

A further way to embed mentoring within children's wider ecologies is through appropriate family engagement. The Covid-period diary material highlighted that when mentoring moved into homes, increased family presence gave mentors insight into children's contexts and provided opportunities for parents/carers to understand programme content and reinforce learning at home. Programmes should therefore consider appropriate, agreed, positive, and safe ways to engage families, such as inviting parents/carers into selected sessions, sharing programme highlights and children's growth, and helping families understand what children are learning so that this can be reinforced beyond sessions (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Varga & Zaff, 2018).

Notably, although children described some perceived transfer of social and relational skills to friendships and social situations, such as feeling better able to make friends, "mix with others," help others, and manage conflict, they did not explicitly describe strengthened relationships with specific adults or peers outside the programme. This suggests that if strengthening support networks beyond mentoring is an intended PYD outcome, programmes may need to build this in deliberately rather than assume such spill-over effects, as both developmental and bilateral models of mentoring sometimes imply (Cavell et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2005). This is in line with previous research suggesting that mentors should actively engage in connection-building behaviours (Austin et al., 2020; DuBois et al., 2011; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; see section 3.5.4). The practical implication is that character-focused mentoring should be designed to strengthen connection not only within the mentoring dyad or group, but also across the child's wider networks, including supported "linking out" behaviours that encourage help-seeking and connection with trusted adults beyond the programme.

Finally, the recommendations above should be implemented in ways that are attentive to social justice principles. This follows from the histories of both youth mentoring and character education, where efforts to support young people have at times reproduced paternalistic, deficit-based, and individualising assumptions by positioning children, families, or communities as problems to be corrected rather than recognising the structural and relational conditions that shape opportunities for flourishing (Hagler et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2013; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Walsh, 2017). The current findings did not directly examine advocacy, collective action,

or structural change, and therefore should not be overstated as evidence of fully social justice-oriented mentoring. Nevertheless, they support movement in this direction at the level of programme design and everyday practice by foregrounding mutuality, youth voice, strengths, personalisation, and children's wider relational contexts (see also section 5.3.3.2, "Challenging power dynamics in character-focused mentoring").

Each of the five recommendations contributes to this orientation. Close connection was most valued when experienced as respectful and mutual, aligning with social justice mentoring frameworks that emphasise shared power, mutual learning, collaboration, and youth dignity (Liang et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2019). Structured activities appeared most useful when they were strength-based, flourishing-oriented, and personally meaningful, as discussed in section 8.1 above, which is consistent with critiques of deficit-based character education and mentoring that caution against framing young people as problems to be corrected rather than as developing persons whose strengths and opportunities for flourishing should be recognised (Hagler et al., 2023; Kristjánsson, 2013; Walsh, 2017). Tailoring content to children reflected a mentee-centred approach, placing the child, their voice, their interpretations, and their specific context at the centre of practice. This reflects PYD's focus on specific young people and adaptive person-context relations, including fair access to the relationships, opportunities, and resources needed for healthy development (Bowers et al., 2015; Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2021).

Similarly, autonomy-supportive mentoring positioned children as active participants rather than passive recipients, supporting shared power, youth voice, critical thinking, ownership, and the capacity to actively engage with and affect their environments and futures (Brookes et al., 2025; Damon, 2004; Liang et al., 2013). Finally, embedding mentoring within children's wider relational ecologies moves practice beyond a narrow, individual-level focus by recognising that character growth and flourishing depend not only on personal skills or strengths, but also on relationships, opportunities, and social conditions around them (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Overall, the practical recommendations above may function as guardrails against reproducing overly individualising or corrective models of character-focused mentoring. While further efforts are needed to address systemic barriers more directly, these recommendations suggest that programmes should seek not simply to develop "better" individuals, but to support children's flourishing in ways that are respectful, contextualised, empowering, and attentive to the conditions that make flourishing possible.

8.5 Recommendations for evaluation and measurement in character-focused mentoring

This thesis also has implications for future evaluations of the current character-focused mentoring programme and similar interventions. First, it suggests that these may benefit from more closely integrated triangulated methods. While the current research triangulated findings from its three studies, participant samples were not linked to one another, limiting the ability to match specific findings directly between participants across studies. Future research could aim to capture mentor and mentee accounts, quantitative outcomes, broader teacher and parent/carer perspectives, and implementation-based indicators (e.g., session count, activities completed, observed use of strategies) concurrently. This is especially important since previous research has found informant discrepancies between mentor and mentee perceptions of relationship quality (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Kern et al., 2019). Matching mentee accounts with mentor diaries and indicators of engagement, satisfaction, understanding, and growth could therefore offer a more comprehensive picture of individual children's journeys and shed further light on some of the processes and mechanisms at play.

Second, findings from Study 3 indicate that future research measuring outcomes of character-focused mentoring should better capture individual-level change and context-sensitive application. Group averages can conceal meaningful person-specific trajectories, particularly in interventions designed to be tailored and relational (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Silke et al., 2019). Measures could therefore use child-specific indicators such as goal-attainment approaches, match individual change to attendance and implementation quality, and include repeated brief measures that track change over time rather than only pre/post snapshots (Kidwell & Almirall, 2023; Logan et al., 2022; see section 7.3.2). The value of the diary method in Study 1 also points in this direction, as repeated reflections offered insight into gradual change, relational dynamics, and applied learning among specific children and mentors that would have been difficult to capture through one-off end-point reflections alone. Future evaluations could also deliberately include perspectives that may have been less visible in the current qualitative studies, including children and mentors who disengaged, benefited less, were quieter in focus groups, or experienced the programme as mismatched.

Third, future evaluations should measure programme-specific outcomes rather than relying purely on existing questionnaires which are validated but may only capture distal proxies (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). This would involve using outcome measures that closely map onto the programme theory of change and qualitative accounts of growth (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). The current qualitative findings suggest that, for character-focused mentoring, some of the most significant areas of growth may relate to contextualised, process-oriented outcomes, including increased self-awareness, thoughtfulness, metacognition, and phronesis-related growth. Such growth is in line with this thesis's account of character as encompassing one's inner world, motivations, and reflections.

Relatedly, future evaluations should use richer, contextualised forms of measurement to capture how children understand, reason, and apply character strengths in real situations. If important outcomes include self-awareness, reflective honesty, metacognition, phronesis, and applied use of strengths, fixed-response questionnaires alone are unlikely to be sufficient. As discussed earlier, these forms of growth may also change how children evaluate themselves: some may report improvement, while others may become more critical because they now notice difficulties they previously overlooked, potentially obscuring mean change even where underlying competence improves (see sections 6.3.3 and 7.3.3). Future evaluations may therefore require both alternative self-report measures that capture reflective self-awareness, metacognition, and phronesis, and richer multi-method assessments, such as situational vignettes, open-ended explorations, contextualised scenarios, naturalistic observer ratings, and mentor, teacher, or parent/carer reports to capture how children reason about and respond to concrete situations.

8.6 Limitations and directions for future research

The conclusions of this thesis should be interpreted in light of the limitations discussed in earlier chapters. First, given my proximity to programme design and delivery, it is inherently difficult to evaluate objectively aspects of the programme and my own interpretive framing, even where I took steps to mitigate this through study design, supervision, and triangulation (see section 4.5). Furthermore, qualitative studies offer rich insight into perceived impacts and possible mechanisms but cannot on their own establish causal effects. They also remain vulnerable to self-selection, social desirability dynamics, informant discrepancies, and the constraints of

developmentally demanding self-reflection in late childhood (see sections 5.3.4 and 6.3.4). Study 3 provided a complementary pre-test/post-test comparison, yet the quantitative evidence was constrained by low power and by the measurement and comprehension limits of self-report. In addition, the measures may not have been sensitive to heterogeneous, person-specific, or uneven patterns of change (see section 7.3.4). Finally, as a case study of a particular programme and context, the findings are best framed in terms of transferability rather than statistical generalisability, offering mechanisms and implementation conditions that readers can judge against their own settings.

These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings, but they have implications for future research. The thesis offers a theoretically grounded and empirically informed account of how character-focused mentoring may support growth, but the proposed outcomes, mechanisms, implementation conditions, and patterns of heterogeneity require further testing. Future research should examine these in greater detail, focusing less on whether mentoring “works” in general and more on pathways of change, implementation and facilitation factors, and individual differences affecting how change unfolds.

First, future research could formally test the proposed mechanisms and implementation conditions identified in this thesis. Mixed-method, longitudinal designs could examine whether relational safety predicts openness and disclosure, whether disclosure is associated with improved wellbeing or sense of self, whether it enables mentors to provide more tailored support, whether autonomy-supportive processes increase internalisation, intentionality, and ownership, and whether all of the above predicts application beyond sessions (Kiadarbandsari, 2025; Pennebaker, 2012; Spencer et al., 2023; Weinstein et al., 2012). Studies could also triangulate mentor and child reports of mutuality and boundaries, exploring the effect of authenticity, reciprocity, and anticipatory empathy practices on experiences of closeness and closure (Lester et al., 2019; Pryce, 2012). Relatedly, the thesis suggests that gains in openness, self-awareness, and reflective thinking may function as early mediators of change. This could be examined by measuring these capacities at multiple time points and testing whether early changes predict later outcomes such as self-regulation, help-seeking, or application of strengths (Deutsch et al., 2017; Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Kiadarbandsari, 2025; Raihan & Cogburn, 2023).

Research could also explore the balance between informal interaction and structured conversation, flexibility and programme standards, and autonomy and developmental or ethical guidance in facilitating mentee development. This could include structured observations of mentoring interactions (e.g., informal conversation, responding to mentee cues, tailoring activities, changing explanations, amending the format, and supporting youth autonomy and independent thinking) mapped to relational quality and to growth outcomes (DuBois & Keller, 2017; Lyons et al., 2019). It could also include experimental or quasi-experimental designs to strengthen inference; for example, by testing whether specific autonomy-supportive mentoring practices increase relational quality, internalisation, and application (Davis & McQuillin, 2022; Weinstein et al., 2012). Mentor flexibility and autonomy support could also be scored against fidelity and adherence to core principles to examine how different balances relate to mentee engagement and growth. Finally, all of these dynamics could be examined longitudinally to understand how they shift over time (Bowers et al., 2015; Li & Julian, 2012).

Future research should also examine mechanisms in blended and group-based designs. The current findings suggest that peer processes, multiple mentoring ties, and skilled staff facilitation may provide additional routes to belonging, modelling, and engagement (Kuperminc & Deutsch, 2021; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). This also offers an additional context for exploring the balance between structure and flexibility. Studies could pair structured observation of facilitation (i.e., how leaders balance structure and play, manage conflict, and contain flexibility) with measures of group cohesion, belonging, and individual outcomes (Dowd et al., 2015; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014; Sánchez et al., 2018). This would test the suggestion that interpersonal growth may partly stem from group processes, and that flexibility in mentor selection and group configuration may support engagement when held within a well-facilitated climate that upholds safety, core curriculum principles, and a learning orientation. Importantly, all of the above may operate differently for different children, mentors, and contexts. Future research should seek to better capture and understand these individual differences and heterogeneity in mentoring, especially in light of the modest and uneven effects reported both in the current research and in the literature more widely (Raposa et al., 2019b; Rhodes, 2020). The emphasis in the findings on personalisation and tailoring suggests that fit matters, but the current research did not systematically test which individual characteristics or micro-contexts explain variation in outcomes.

Future research should therefore examine whether children's needs, preferences for closeness, attachment histories, developmental level, and baseline support networks shape whether a relationship feels safe, whether activities become meaningful, whether strategies generalise into daily life, and how much structure, flexibility, autonomy, and guidance is most helpful. Equally, micro-contexts such as mentor style, facilitation approach, project leader characteristics, and implementation factors, such as session count, activities completed, and fidelity ratings, may interact with both individual characteristics and the processes discussed above. This calls for research that systematically captures such factors and tests whether and how they affect both mentoring outcomes and the mechanisms proposed above (Pryce, 2012; Varga & Zaff, 2018; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). Using designs capable of capturing individual-level change would further support this by identifying heterogeneity not only in participant characteristics, but also in developmental trajectories and outcomes (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015).

Overall, this thesis puts forward an understanding of character-focused mentoring as a relational, structured, autonomy-supportive, and ecologically embedded developmental process rather than one driven by a single "active ingredient." Its central contribution is an integrated PYD model that brings together a flourishing-oriented and expansive conceptualisation of character with an empirically grounded account of how mentoring is experienced, what character growth can look like, how it may arise, and what skilled implementation may require. The model suggests that in the context of youth mentoring, character may be "caught" through relational ethos, trust, modelling, and group belonging; "taught" through personalised engagement with structured curriculum activities; and "sought" through autonomy-supportive interactions that help children reflect, take ownership, and apply strengths in everyday life. Crucially, these pathways are interdependent. Trust enables meaningful engagement with activities, activities give relationships developmental direction, and autonomy-supportive practice helps children carry learning into their wider lives.

The thesis therefore provides a new way of framing, studying, and strengthening character-focused mentoring. Conceptually, it brings character education into dialogue with developmental science by embedding an expansive account of character and flourishing within reciprocal person-context relations. Empirically, it offers a process-centred account of character growth in late childhood, including shifts in confidence, sense of self, reflective self-awareness, everyday self-regulation, thoughtfulness, intentionality, and the applied use of strengths.

Practically, it suggests that programmes should support mentors to balance closeness with boundaries, structure with flexibility, fidelity with personalisation, and children's agency with adult guidance, while attending to wider relational ecologies. Methodologically, it demonstrates why gradual, interpretive, and person-specific development requires richer, context-sensitive, multi-method evaluation. Although the proposed outcomes and mechanisms require further testing and refinement across programmes and contexts, the thesis moves the field beyond the general proposition that mentoring holds promise by providing an integrated model for examining how trusted relationships become developmentally significant and how the conditions supporting this can be studied and strengthened.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Preview of Curriculum Activities

- A1. 7-stage journey
- A2. Self-knowledge:
 - a. Character strengths activity
 - b. Gazette activity
 - c. Animal cards activity
- A3. Growth mindset
 - a. Mindful moment on growth
 - b. Mistakes activity
- A4. Goal setting
 - a. Mindful moment visualising outcomes
 - b. Visualising obstacles activity
 - c. Plan for overcoming obstacles activity
- A5. Resilience
 - a. The drop page
 - b. Negative thought activity
 - c. Stress cycle activity
 - d. Negative and positive swirls activity
- A6. Self-control
 - a. Fast and slow brain activity
 - b. Emotions and their triggers activity
 - c. Take charge of your brain activity
- A7. Good judgement
 - a. Everyday choices activity
 - b. Consequences activity
- A8. Fairness
 - a. Fair versus same activity
 - b. True fairness activity



Self Knowledge: Who am I, and who would I like to become?



Growth Mindset: I can grow and mistakes make me smarter!



Goal Setting: I can set goals and overcome obstacles.



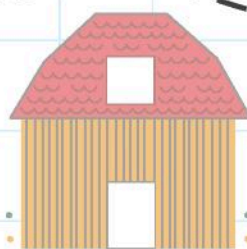
Resilience: I know how to challenge and overcome negative thoughts!



Self Control: I can identify my emotions and how they impact my behaviour.



Good Judgement: I understand empathy and consequences in decision making!



Fairness: I have a positive effect on the world around me!

My Character Journey



Character strengths

Read over the character strengths below.

Which strengths have you already developed? Add a tick next to them.
Which strengths do you still need to work on? Circle them.

Choose your top three strengths and write them at the bottom. Then in the squares, draw something that reminds you of this strength. You can draw a symbol, an animal or somebody you know who has this strength.

Honest

Patient

Compassionate

Determined

Respectful

Smart

Good team player

Optimistic

Caring

Gentle

Self controlled

Responsible

Brave

Friendly

Enthusiastic

Generous

Creative

Kind

Trustworthy

Thoughtful

Helpful

Relaxed

Good sense of humour

Organised

Resilient

Fair

Hard working

Curious

My top 3 strengths:



The WISE Gazette

The local paper has decided to run a piece on you. Tell your story here...

Introducing new sensation and Character Strength Personality: _____

_____ is a WISE celebrity. They are known for

They were caught on camera when they

In an interview with the Gazette, they offered this advice to others who want to grow in this strength:

_____ as well as their excellence in the character strength:

Captured on camera!

NEWS
LIVE

This photo was taken during the amazing act:

Breaking News: City left in awe!





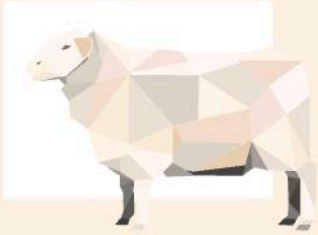
Animal strengths

Look at the animal strength cards on the next two pages. Which of them are most like you? You can add a few ones of your own.

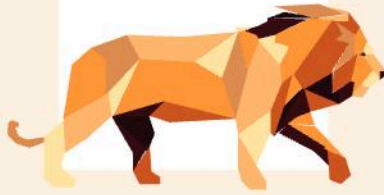
You can cut them out and use them to talk with your mentor, then keep them safe or stick them down here.



Trusting



Brave



Quiet



Resilient



Determined



Smart



Careful



Loyal



Powerful



Generous



Gentle



Focused



Protective



Independent



Graceful



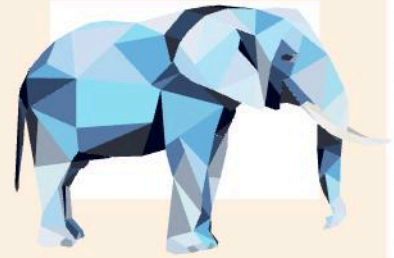
Trustworthy



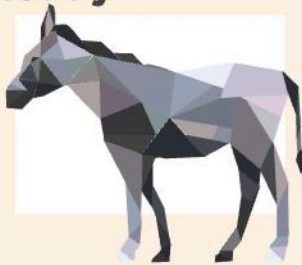
Wise



Kind



Steady



Resourceful



Clever



Fun



Strong



Unique





Mindful moment

Close your eyes and think about what you were like when you were just a baby.

Think about how much you have grown since then.

You can draw yourself when you were little.



When I was a baby, I was super cute. But I couldn't count to ten or say my name or read or even walk. I have grown so much! Wow, I wonder how much more I will grow in the next 10 years of my life!





Did you know?

Read the comic and answer the questions.

Today we will be building a tower out of paper



Group 1

We did it on the first try!

We are so smart!

Group 2

Oh no! I'm so sorry, I touched the sides and it fell

That's okay, at least we know it was not very stable

Group 2

Oh no, it fell again! I guess we didn't make the sheets very straight

That's okay, mistakes happen. Let's try again

Group 2

Wahoo! We did it

Yay! This one works

Questions for discussion:

Who made more mistakes?

Who do you think learned more?

When the class repeats the activity outside, whose tower will last in the wind?

Can you think of a time you made a mistake? What happened?

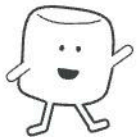




Mindful moment

Look back at the goal you set last time. Close your eyes and think about how you will feel once you achieve your goal.

Will you feel satisfied? Happy? Excited about your next goal? Proud of yourself?



You can write or draw how you will feel in this cloud.
Remember to breath in and out deeply, imagining that feeling in your whole body!





Beware: Obstacles Ahead!

Think about any obstacles that might come up along your journey to achieving your goal. How will it feel when things go wrong? Write or draw your thoughts in these boxes.

Obstacle:

Obstacle:

Obstacle:





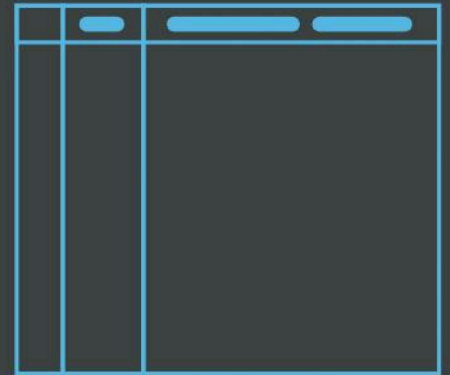
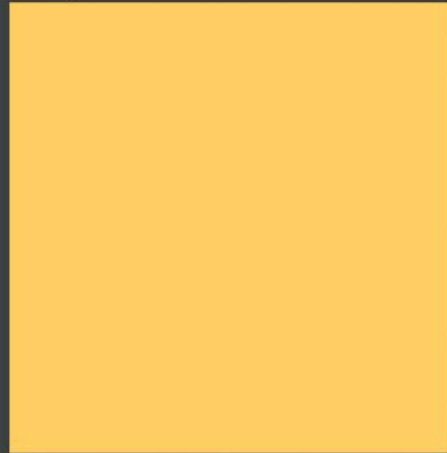
The Plan

Now think about a plan you can put in place to prepare yourself if things go wrong. What will you do when you face an obstacle? What will you tell yourself?

Think about what you can say to yourself when you need a bit of encouragement.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Step 1:

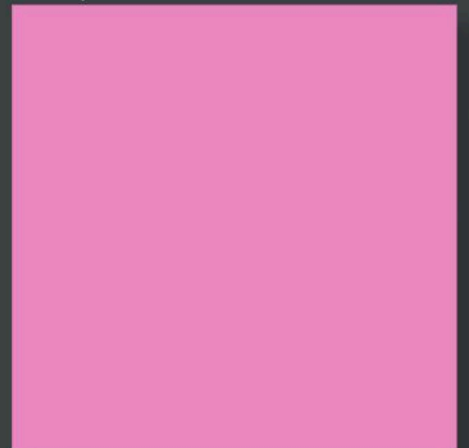


Step 2:



- _____ ✓
- _____ ✓
- _____ ✓
- _____ ✓
- _____
- _____

Step 3:



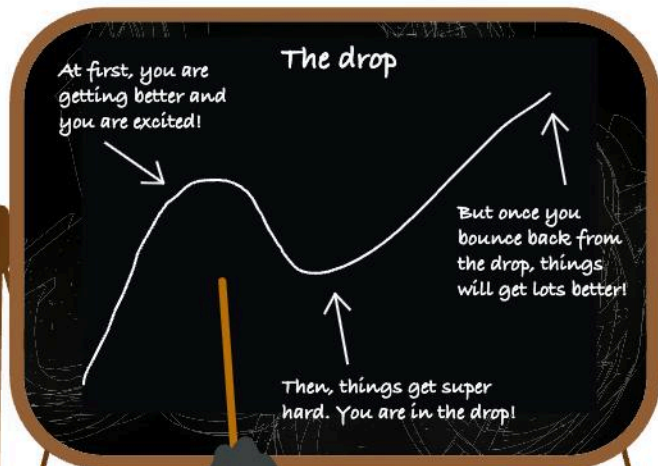
Encouragements:



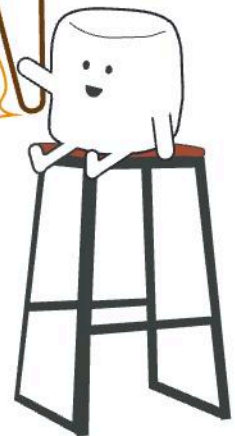


Bouncing back from the drop

Falling down, making mistakes and failing is all a part of growth. Imagine you've been going to football practice, and you're doing really well! Then one day you totally mess up and now suddenly you are nervous to play and you keep messing up at every practice! Your football has got worse and you feel like giving up and no longer coming to practice. What's going on?



Oh I see, you're in the drop!



Exactly! You might not be able to play very well right now, but I bet that if you keep practising, you'll get loads better! You can rethink if you still want to play football. But if you do, then you need to be patient when it feels like you're not improving. When you're in the drop, your brain is working really hard to learn new things, you just have to keep trying!

Can you think of a time you were in the drop? What happened?

Is it okay to be sad when you're in the drop?

Is it okay to rethink if you want to continue when you're in the drop?

What can we learn from marshmallows about bouncing back?



Did you know that **bouncing back** is what marshmallows do best?

When there is a lot of pressure on a marshmallow, for example, when it is squashed, pulled, bent or dropped, it doesn't snap, like chocolate does. Instead, it **bounces back** to its original shape!

Humans, like marshmallows, are made to bounce back from **the drop**!





Courtroom activity

One of the things that makes it hard to be resilient is when we talk to ourselves negatively. Can you or your mentor think of a negative thought that you have had? Let's put it on trial!



The negative thought
on trial today is:

What would I tell a friend if they
had the same thought?

Evidence for this
thought:



Does this thought feel bigger than
what is actually true?

Evidence against
this thought:





The stress cycle

4. How does the stress change your thoughts?

A large, empty white rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing answers to question 4.

What can you say to yourself when you are stressed?



1. What are some things that cause you to feel stressed?

A white rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing answers to question 1.A white rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing answers to question 1.A white rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing answers to question 1.

3. How does the stress change your emotions?

A large, empty white rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing answers to question 3.

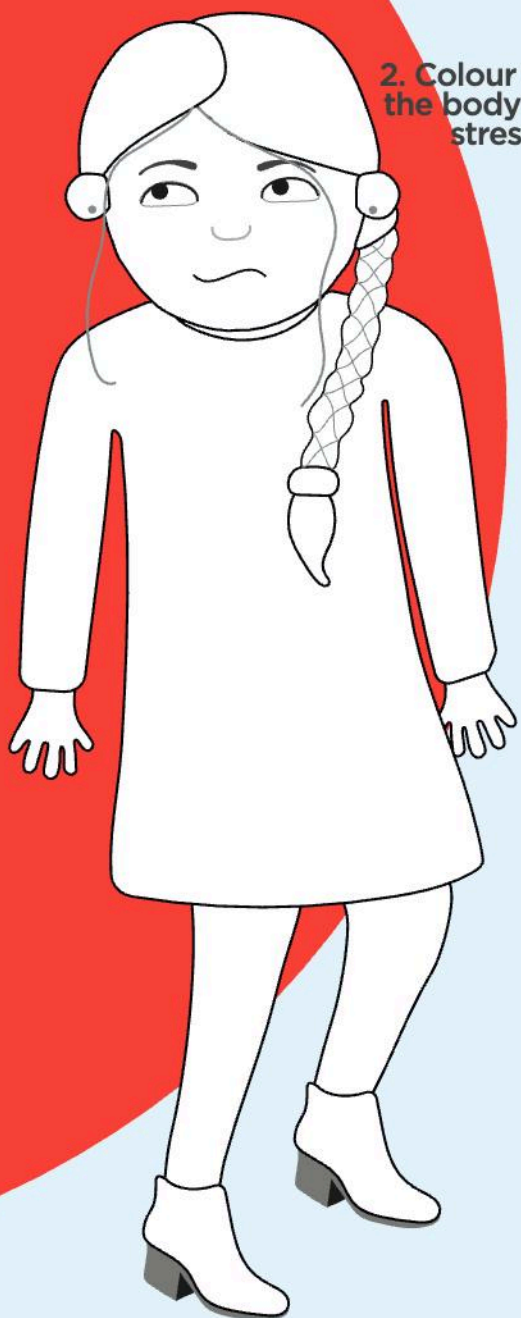
5. How does the stress change your actions?



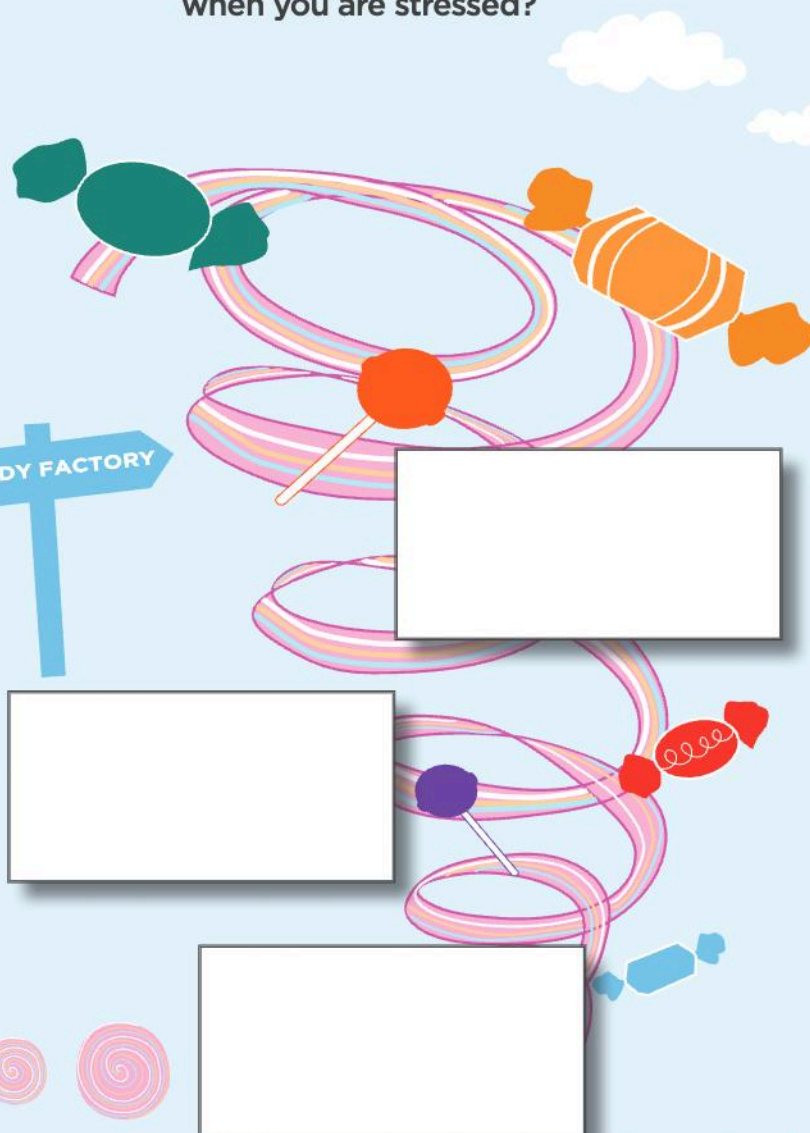
What can you do to change your behaviour when you are stressed?



2. Colour where in the body you feel stressed.



6. What makes you feel better when you are stressed?





The feel-think-act swirls

Did you know that how we feel, think and act are all connected? Sometimes, we can find ourselves in a negative swirl. But if we realise this is happening, we can turn it into a positive swirl!

For example, here are two different ways of responding to being called out in class for not listening:

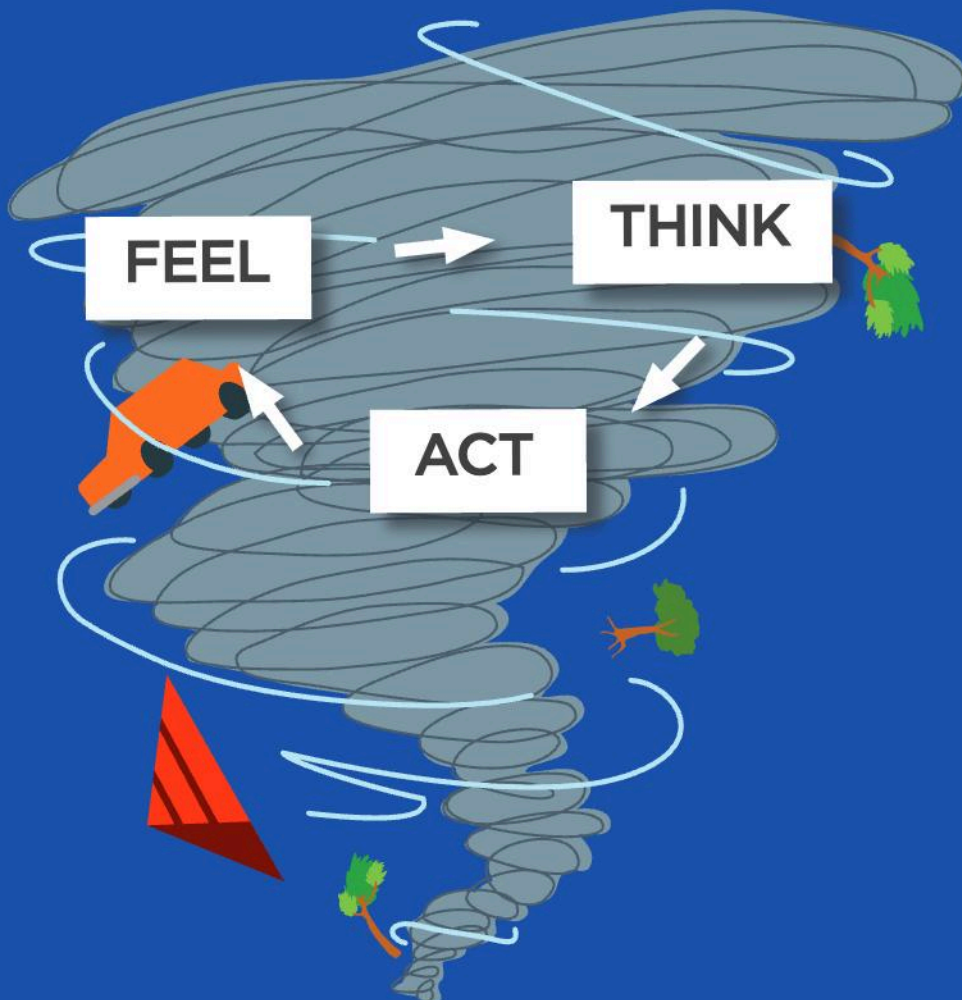
Negative swirl

FEEL	embarrassed
THINK	the teacher is being unfair
ACT	by skipping the homework and getting in trouble

Positive swirl

FEEL	guilty
THINK	you should start listening
ACT	by starting to pay attention, and learning something interesting

Negative swirl



Below are different scenarios. Choose one or two scenarios, or come up with your own, to discuss what a positive and negative swirl could be like.

Everybody finished their work much faster than you

Somebody pushed you

You missed the school dance because you were ill

You missed the goal which would have made your team win

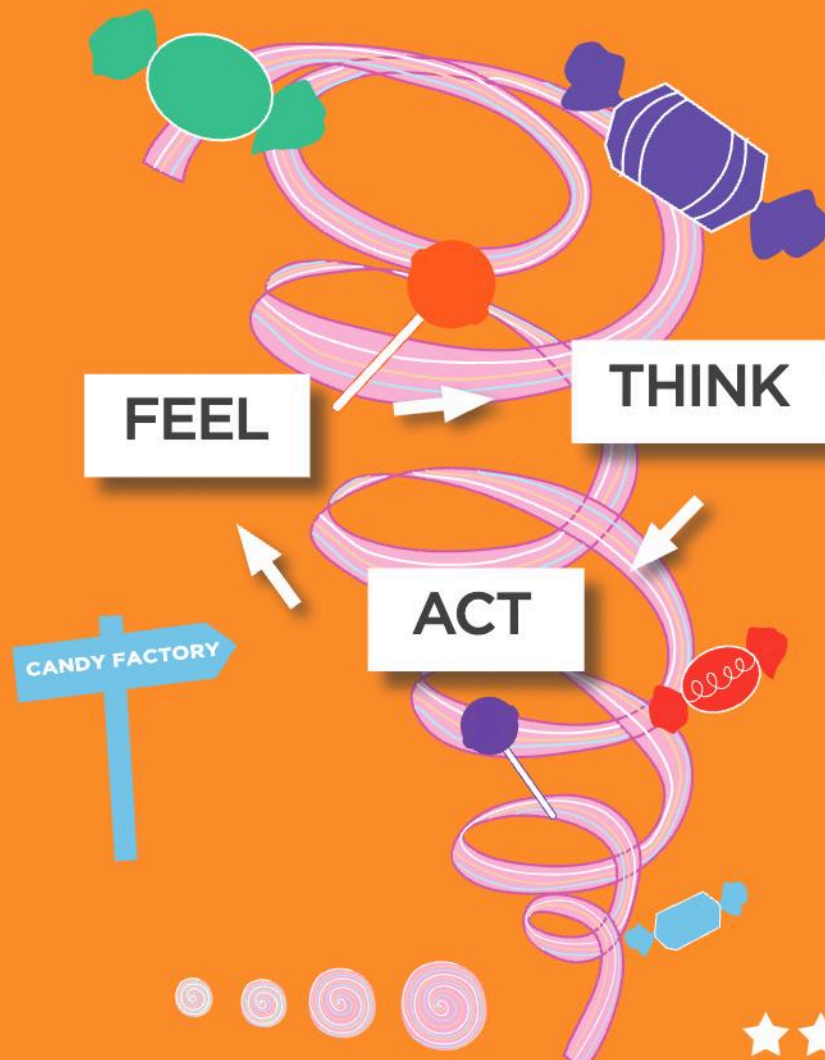
Somebody shouted at you from crossing the street without looking

Your friend didn't choose you for their football team during play time

You have been told you cannot have any cookies unless you finish your dinner

Your parents told you off for being on your phone when you should have been sleeping

Positive swirl





The fast and slow brain

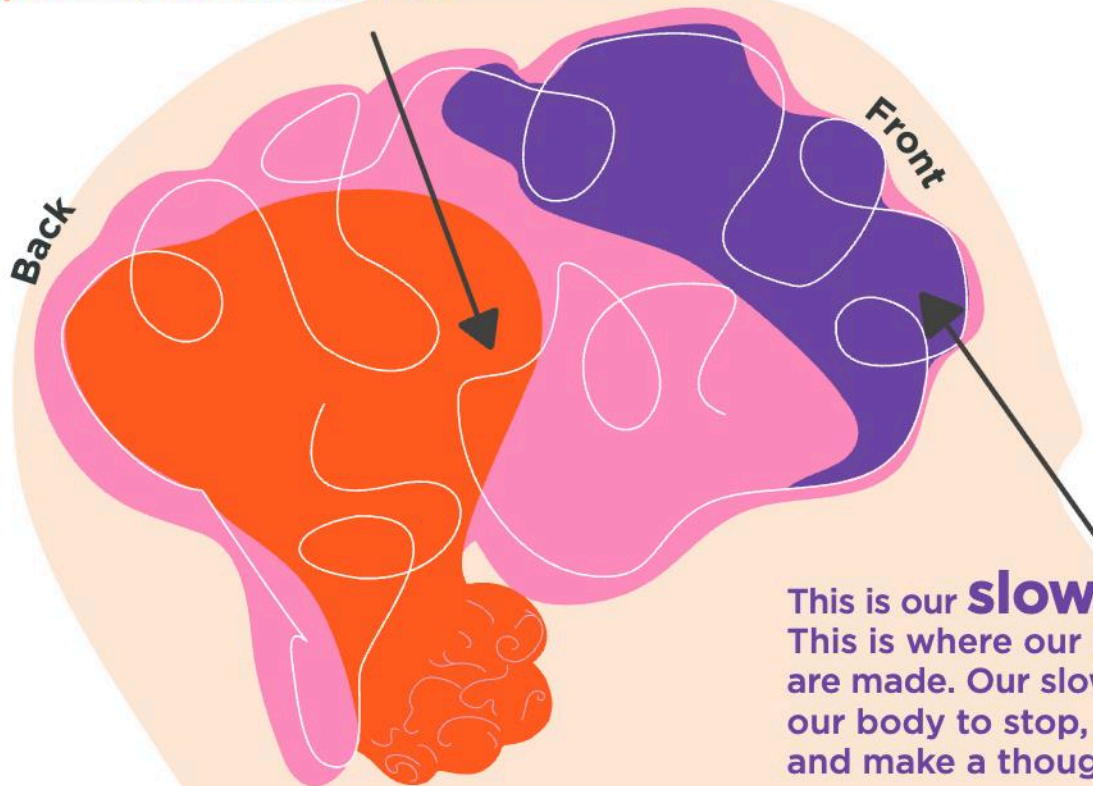
Self control is about managing **behaviour** and **emotions**

how we act

how we feel

What's happening
in our brain when
we use self control ?

This is our **fast brain**.
This is where our most
impulsive decisions are made.



This is our **slow brain**.
This is where our best decisions
are made. Our slow brain reminds
our body to stop, take a break
and make a thoughtful decision.

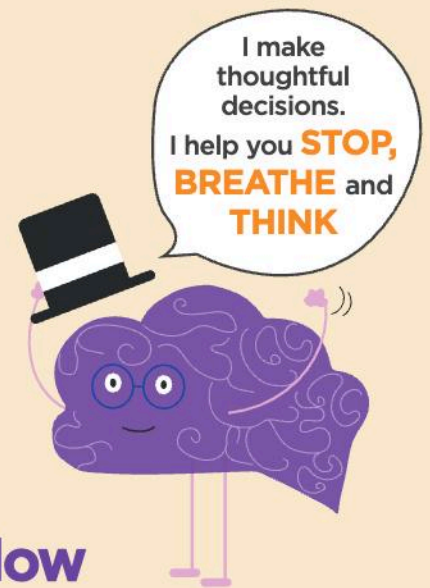
Our fast brain acts quickly because it's trying to keep us safe. For example, if you touch something very hot, your fast brain will quickly make the decision to pull your hand away! It is so good that we have this part of our brain!

But sometimes, our fast brain can overreact to things. Have you ever done something silly or mean without thinking about it because you reacted quickly? That's your fast brain!



Fast

What happens if you listen to the fast, impulsive decision?



Slow

What happens if you slow down and make a thoughtful decision?

Scenario 1

Dinner will be ready soon. There is a box of chocolates and you are very hungry.

Scenario 2

A classmate you do not like very much is chatting to your best friend. You don't want them to talk to each other.

Scenario 3





Emotions & their triggers

Look at the different emotions listed on the page and think about what things make you feel this way.

Talk to your mentor about times you have felt these emotions, what caused the emotions and why you felt like that.

SADNESS



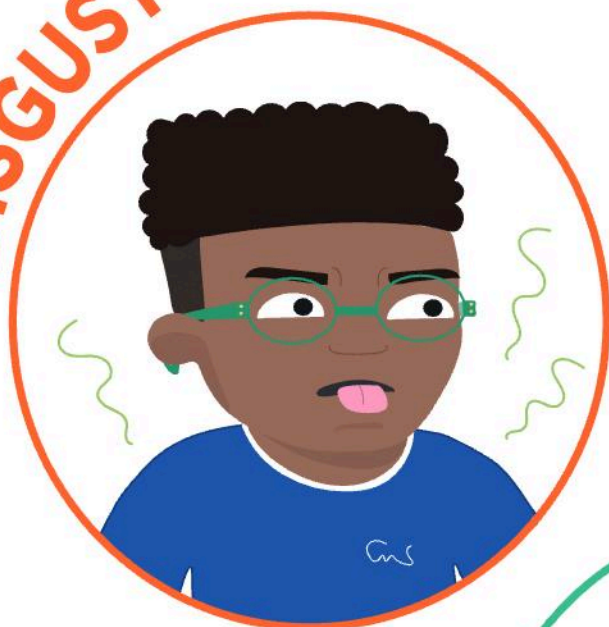
FEAR



ANGER



DISGUST



EXCITEMENT



EXTRA DISCUSSION

Talk about what you might do the next time you feel one of these emotions. Have you learnt something that might help you act differently?

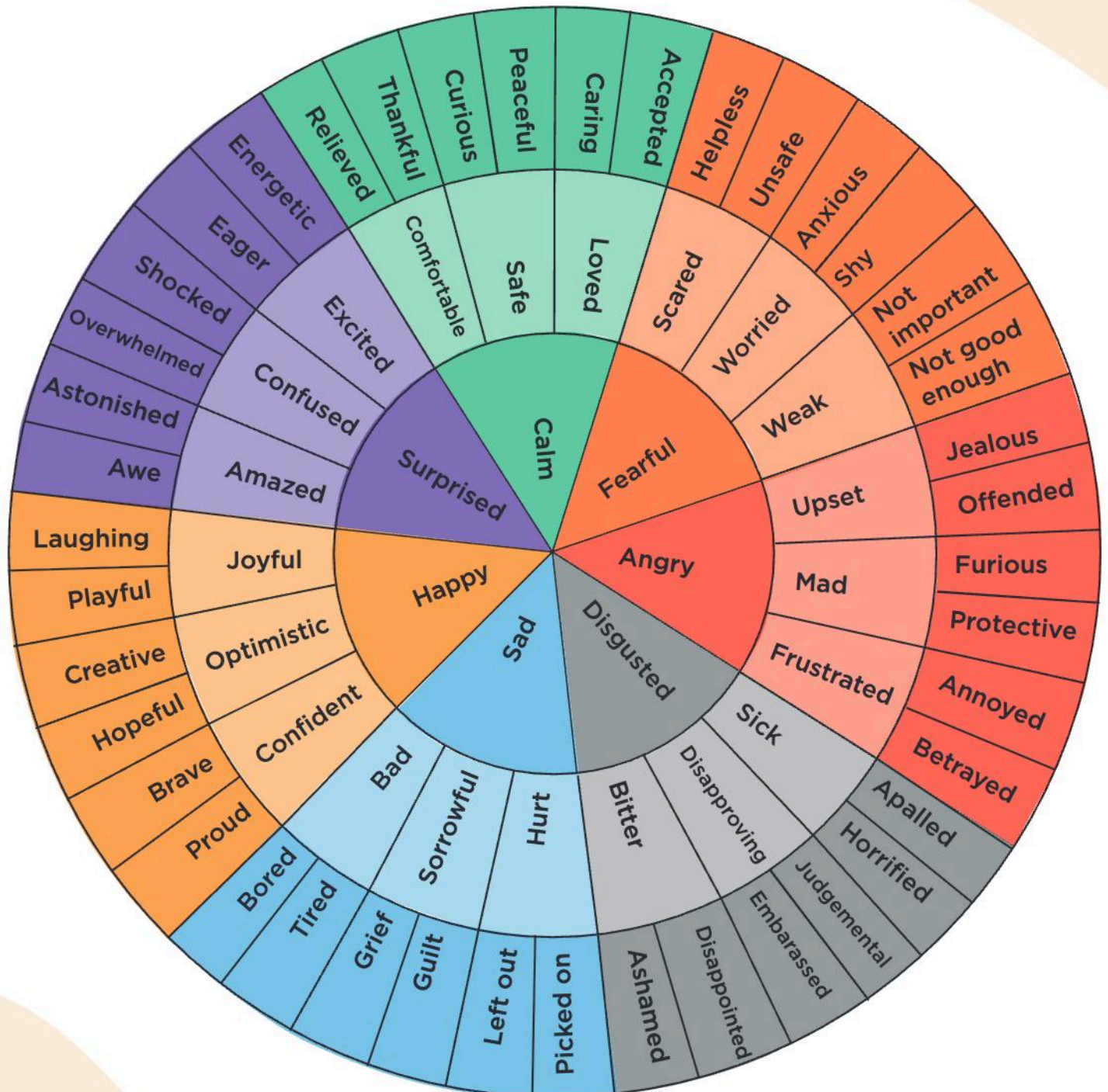
EXTRA TIP

For a whole wheel of lots of different emotions, to the next page. You can discuss with your mentor which specific emotions you have felt recently.



The Emotions Wheel

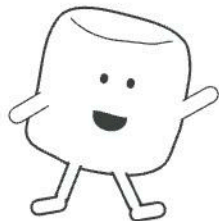
Use this wheel to think about some of the specific emotions behind the more general emotions.





Take charge of your brain

Think about the emotions we talked about in the last session, or even different ones. Which ones do you struggle with the most?



'Write your answer in the box over here.'

The emotion I struggle with is ...

Think of times you've felt these emotions. How did you cope with it? Talk about this with your mentor and put your answers into the boxes below

Unhelpful Ways

Helpful Ways

Try to fill in all five helpful ways of dealing with this emotion!





Making choices

Every person makes many choices every day. Some are small choices, while others are bigger and more important ones. Some



What are some of the choices you make?

In the morning...

It affects...

In the classroom...

It affects...

At break time...

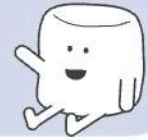
It affects...

In the lunch hall...

It affects...

At home...

It affects...



In the evening...

It affects...

At the weekend...

It affects...

Every week...

It affects...



At break time,
I choose who I am
going to talk to and
play with. It affects me
and also my classmates.





Consequences

Below are 9 different actions. You can cut them up if you'd like. Think about what could happen as a result of each action.

Then arrange them according to how big their consequences could be, both good and bad. If you'd like, you can use the Reflection page to stick them down.



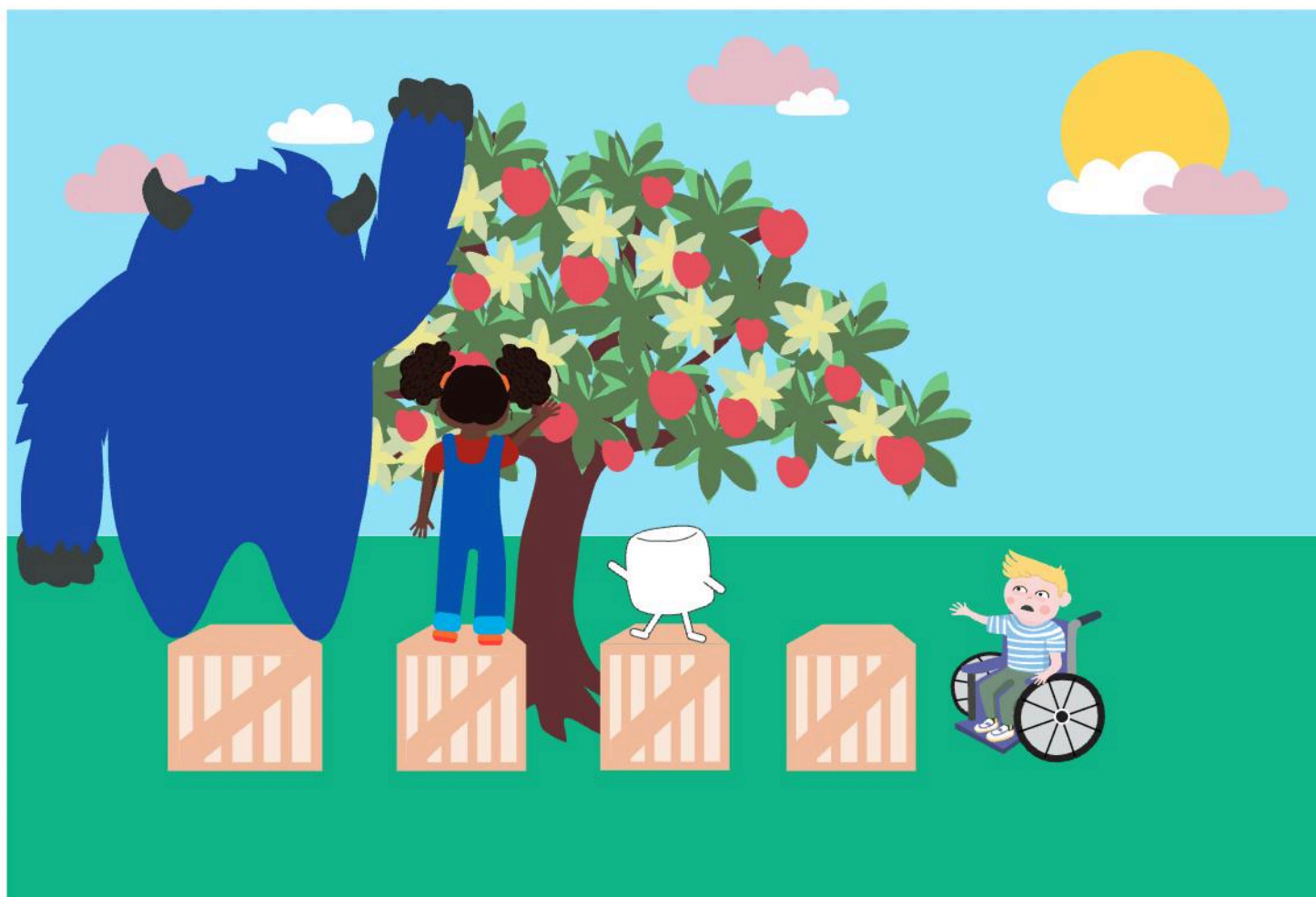
Handing in a phone that you found on the bus	Lying to the headteacher	Cheating in a game without anyone seeing
Inviting someone to play with you when they are lonely	Saying that the football didn't cross the line for a goal when it actually did	Telling your mum that you hate her
Running across the school hall because you are late	Telling one of your friends that you never want to be their friend again	Bullying someone





Fair doesn't mean the same

What do you think about these pictures?

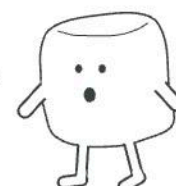


The same



Treating everyone the same means giving them the exact same opportunities.

Oh! But in this situation it would mean that only Kaitlyn can pick herself an apple!





Fair

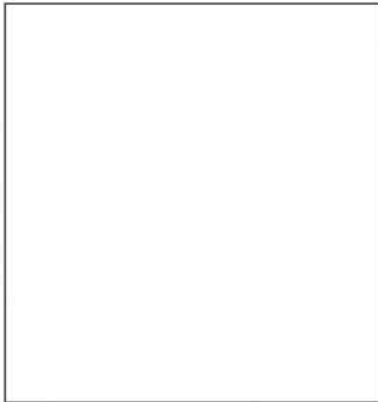




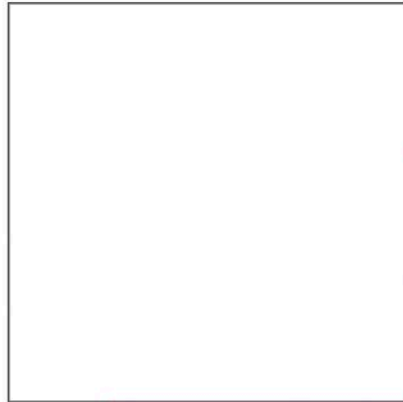
Is that really fair?

Read Kaitlyn and Jack's situations. You can draw what's happening in the situation in the boxes.

Which characters have a good understanding of fairness and why? What is fair in the situation?



Kaitlyn comes to her ice skating practice feeling miserable.

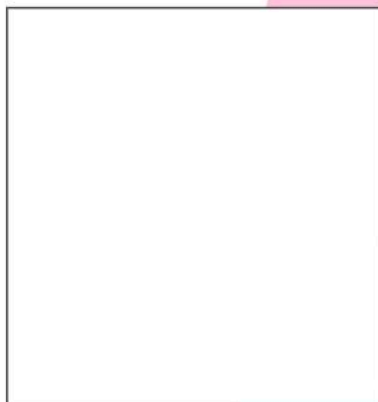


She had a rubbish morning and then in school some of the other children made fun of her.



During practice, one of the other girls makes a mistake. Kaitlyn laughs at her. It makes her feel better to tease someone else when she is upset. "If I am upset, I am going to make everyone else upset too, that's only fair" she thinks to herself.

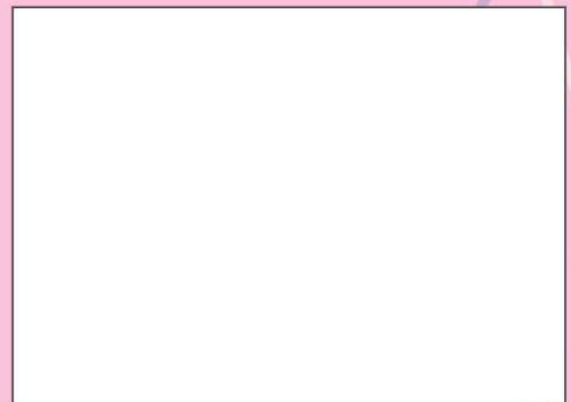
Do you think Kaitlyn has a good understanding of fairness in this situation?
What would be a fair way to respond?



Jack's brother was mean to him earlier.



Now, Sam is being blamed for something he didn't do. In fact, he is being blamed for something that Jack did.



Jack sees his brother is being blamed for something that Jack did. He decides to let Sam take the blame. "Serves him right for being mean to me earlier, that's only fair," he thinks to himself.

Do you think Jack has a good understanding of fairness in this situation?
What would be a fair way to respond?



Appendix B

Study 1 Supplementary Materials:

- B1. Ethical Approval
- B2. Permission from organisation
- B3. Information sheets and consent forms for research advisory interviews and main diary study
- B4. Research advisory interview questions
- B5. Pre and post diary interview questions
- B6. Guide to reflective writing
- B7. Diary study prompts

College of Social
Sciences

27 February 2020

Dear Hana

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee**Project Title:**

A diary study exploring mentors; experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits

Application No: 400190116

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: 27/02/2020
- Project end date: 01/12/2024
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the *College Ethics Review Feedback* document that has been sent to you as the Collated Comments Document in the online system.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research:
(https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf)
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The *Request for Amendments to an Approved Application* form should be used:
<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/>

Yours sincerely,

Dr Muir Houston
College Ethics Officer**Muir Houston, Senior Lecturer****College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer**

Social Justice, Place and Lifelong Education Research
University of Glasgow
School of Education, St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street
Glasgow G3 6NH
0044+141-330-4699 Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

22nd August 2020

Re: Permission for research project

This letter confirms that Citywise Mentoring Ltd supports Hana Butorova's PhD research on "Exploring character-focused mentoring as a means of facilitating character growth and Positive Youth Development (PYD) in middle and late childhood" at the University of Glasgow.

Many thanks,



Luke Wilkinson
Chief Executive

Research Advisory Interview Plain Language Statement

Title of Project: A research advisory interview about exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits

Researcher: Hana Butorova, PhD student at the School of Education

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the School of Education

You are being invited to take part in a research advisory interview. Please take time to carefully read the information below and decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the interview? This interview will help us to design a research study exploring the experiences of mentors participating in a youth mentoring programme with a character-focused curriculum. Your insights will help us plan the design and method of the study.

Why have I been chosen? You have been chosen because you have been a mentor in the Citywise mentoring programme, and so represent the population which will participate in the study.

Do I have to take part? The decision to participate in this interview is entirely up to you. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and for any reason, without having to give a reason. This will not affect your relationship with the researcher, with Citywise or with the University of Glasgow in any way.

What will happen if I decide to take part? If you decide to take part, first you will be asked to trial some of the writing prompts we will use in the study by completing two reflective diary logs. These will be about general experiences of Citywise sessions, experiences of social dynamics and relationships in sessions, and about character development in the programme. You will not submit your answers to us, but you will then take part in a recorded online interview where we will ask about your views on the question design as well as on the overall design of our study.

Are there any risks of being in this interview? We do not expect taking part in the interview to constitute any risk to you.

Are there any benefits of being in this interview? This will be an opportunity for you as a mentor to shape the research which aims to understand the experience and processes that make up the Citywise mentoring programme. This research may lead to improvements in the programme in future. This advisory interview will also aim to diminish any potential risks and increase any benefit to mentors who may participate in the full diary study.

Will my taking part in this interview be kept confidential? Confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible. Data from trialling diary material will not be used in the study, and the interview data will be used to steer the design of the study. Your identity will be known to the researcher, but results of the interview will be kept anonymous and if any of these results are used in the report for the study, you will not be recognised from them. However, if any evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered, the University may be obliged to contact relevant agencies.

Who is organising and funding the research? This research is being undertaken as a joint project between the University of Glasgow and Citywise Mentoring Ltd.

Who has reviewed the project? The project has been reviewed by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Further Information: You are very welcome to ask questions about this research interview and to have those questions answered by me before, during or participating.

If you have any further questions about this research or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, at any time feel free to contact me at h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk, or my supervisor, Dr Yvonne Skipper, at Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk.

If you are concerned about any aspect of how this research is conducted, please contact the Convenor of the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Dr Muir Houston at Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Hana Butorova

Research Advisory Interview Consent Form

Title of Project: A research advisory interview about exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits

Researcher: Hana Butorova, h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper, Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk

If you agree to take part in this interview, then please read the following statements and sign your name below.

- *I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.*
- *I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.*
- *I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my relationship with Citywise or with the University arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.*
- *I acknowledge that data from trialling diary materials will not be used in the study, and the interview will only be used to steer the design of the study. If results from the interview are reported in the study, I will not be recognised from them.*
- *I understand that all information recorded will be kept in secure storage at all times*
- *I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.*
- *I understand that I can contact the researcher for this project by e-mail to receive more information.*

I **agree / do not agree** (mark) to take part in the above study.

☐ ☐

I **agree / do not agree** (mark) for the interview to be recorded.

☐ ☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Research advisory interview questions

Ahead of the interview: send the participant a copy of the Plain Language Statement and a copy of both diary prompts (Short weekly reflection prompt, and In-depth reflection prompt). If they decide to participate, ask them to complete these prompts in their own time and have their answers with them at the interview. Schedule a time for a telephone or video interview.

Ensure that participant has completed the prompts. Give time to complete it before the interview if not.

1. Explanation of study (the participant will have heard everything before and seen the below forms already)
2. Read through the Plain Language Statement
3. Ask the participant if they have any questions and answer any questions or concerns they may have.
4. Resend Consent Form, ask participant to take time and consider this
5. Participant signs the Consent Form if they are happy to participate and send it back

Confirm that the participant is okay with the interview being recorded. Begin recording (audio is sufficient)

Interview

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this advisory interview. I will be asking you about your views on the diary prompts that you have completed, and also on the overall design of a study that I am planning to run with mentors. Obviously, our mentoring programme will look different this coming year from what it did last year. [Brief explanation of the new model]. A lot of your thoughts on the design of this study might link to your thoughts on this new model. Feel free to express your opinion of the mentoring model, but I am especially looking for your opinion of the design of the study.

Please be completely honest in your answers, there is no right answer that I am looking for. I want to design the study to minimise risks and hassle and maximise benefits for a variety of participants, so imagine how you would feel if you were participating.

I will begin by asking a few general questions about how you got involved and what you think about the diary study in general. Then I will talk you through my current plan for the design of the diary study and ask for your feedback and suggestions. Finally, I will ask you to take a step back from what I have presented and talk about how you would ideally design the study to fit the purpose, minimise risks and maximise benefits for participants.

Feel free to ask for clarification about any question and to pass any questions you do not want to answer. Is that okay? Do you have any questions now?

1. How and why did you get involved in the Citywise mentoring programme?
2. What do you think about the aim of the diary study, to explore mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits?
3. What do you think about doing this via a diary study?
4. The current plan for the diary study procedure is... [explain the pre interview, two kinds of diary entry prompts and the post-study interview] with 6-8 participants. I'd like to hear your feedback on this structure and on the questions and prompts in each of these sections.
 - a. Pre Interview. Show summary of pre interview questions. What do you think about these questions?
 - i. Are there any questions you would take away? Which ones?
 - ii. Are there any additional questions you would ask? What?
 - iii. Would you change any of the questions? How?
 - b. Short weekly diary entries. Show the prompt. What do you think about this?
 - i. How did you find filling this in?
 - ii. How much did you write?
 - iii. How long did it take you?
 - iv. Did you understand the instructions? Should there be more instructions? What should they say?
 - v. Do you think this is a useful question to ask?
 - c. More detailed in-depth reflections. Show the prompts. What do you think about these?
 - i. How did you find filling in the questions?
 - ii. How long did each question take you?
 - iii. Which question was the easiest to answer?
 - iv. Which was the most difficult?
 - v. Would you change the wording of any of the questions? How?
 - vi. Should any questions have more instructions? What should those be?
 - vii. Which question is the most useful question to ask?
 - viii. Would you take away any questions? Which ones?
 - ix. Are there any additional questions you would ask?
 - d. Currently the plan is to ask participants to complete the short entries weekly, and the in-depth reflections once every 2 months. What do you think about this plan?
 - i. Is this too laborious?
 - ii. How would you feel about this if you were participating in the study?
 - iii. How often would you give participants the two kinds of prompts?
 - iv. Where would you host the diary study? Where would it be easiest for mentors to complete entries?
 - v. What would be the best way of reminding participants to complete their entries? Which medium would you use?
 - e. Would you choose to participate? If so, what would be your motivation for participating?
 - f. What do you think about the below motivations or "incentives"?

- i. "This study could lead to significant improvements in the programme. You can help to make these come about and shape the programme to make it better for the children."
 - ii. "Previous participants of diary studies have said that regularly completing diary entries was beneficial to them. Since the nature of the character-focused curriculum is personal development, this study could enhance your own personal reflection on these topics."
 - iii. "Diary studies offer a lot of control to participants, who can depict their own priorities and end up co-analysing data together with the researcher, both through reflective writing and through the post-diary interview. This study will give you unique insight into a rich method of longitudinal data collection and help you think like a researcher."
- g. What else might attract participants to this study?
- h. Post Interview. Show summary of post-diary interview questions. Obviously, these will depend on the diary entries, but what do you think about these questions?
 - i. Are there any questions you would take away? Which ones?
 - ii. Are there any additional questions you would ask? What?
 - iii. Would you change any of the questions? How?
- 5. Do you have any other suggestions or comments about the design of this study?

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions. The recording will not be shared with any third parties, and will be stored securely. I will use it only to steer the design of the study and if any results from the analysis of this interview are used in the report for the study, you will not be identifiable from them.

Please keep the Plain Language Statement and get in touch with me, my supervisor, the Convenor of the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, or the Citywise Safeguarding officer at safeguarding@citywise.org if there is anything that you would like to discuss further.

Mentor Diary Study
Plain Language Statement

Title of Study: A diary study exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits

Researcher: Hana Butorova, PhD student at the School of Education

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the School of Education

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you want to participate it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to carefully read the information below.

Feel free to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part, and discuss it with others if you wish.

What is the purpose of the study? This study is part of my PhD research project exploring character-focused mentoring as a means of facilitating character growth in middle childhood. It builds on my previous research, which explored children's experiences of character-focused mentoring. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of mentors participating in a youth mentoring programme with a character-focused curriculum.

Why have I been chosen? You were chosen because you are a mentor in the Citywise mentoring programme.

Do I have to take part? The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason. This will not affect your relationship with the researcher, with Citywise or with the University in any way.

What will happen if I decide to take part? The study will begin with an initial pre-study brief and interview, which will last around 30 minutes. Here I will ask about your motivation in becoming involved in mentoring and your expectations. I will also explain about the structure of the study and how it will work with keeping a diary about your experiences.

This will be followed by a diary-keeping period, which will last until the end of the mentoring programme. During this period, you will be asked to submit weekly online diary entries about your experiences of the mentoring programme. Three times during the year, you will be asked for a more in-depth reflective diary entry. This will ask about your experiences of the activities and relationships within the programme, your experiences as a mentor and perceived benefits of the programme to mentees as well as to yourself. This will be hosted online and stored securely.

The study will conclude with an audio-recorded interview about your experience keeping the diary and questions reflecting the content of the diary entries. I will also ask you about your experiences in the project as a whole, and invite you to elaborate on and clarify some of the themes from your diary entries.

Are there any risks of being in this study? We do not expect the study to constitute any risk to you. However, if the process of keeping a diary and discussing experiences of the programme brings up anything distressing, you will have the opportunity to debrief with your project leader and with the Citywise safeguarding officer, accessible to you through myself or by emailing safeguarding@citywise.org.

Are there any benefits of being in this study? The study will be an opportunity for you as a mentor to reflect on your experiences of participating in a project focused on character growth. Every year, mentors highlight the personal benefits that mentoring brings them. The opportunity to reflect on these experiences may enhance their benefit and encourage further personal reflection learning. It will also lead to improvements in the programme itself which will benefit future participants in the programme.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential? Confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and you will not be identifiable from any published documents. All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and any information about you will have your name and project removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. However, please note that because the procedure will include face-to-face interviews, the researcher will know your identity. Furthermore, if any evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered, the University may be obliged to contact relevant agencies.

What will happen to the results of the research study? This study will form a part of my PhD thesis and may be presented at academic conferences and published in academic journals. Once completed, recordings of interviews and diary entries will be deleted, but transcripts will be kept for up to 5 years. If you would like, a copy of the results can be sent to you. Please email me if you would like to receive this summary.

Who is organising and funding the research? This research is being undertaken as a joint project between the University of Glasgow and Citywise Mentoring Ltd.

Who has reviewed the study? The study has been reviewed by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Further Information: You are very welcome to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research.

If you have any further questions about the study or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, at any time feel free to contact me at h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk, or my supervisor, Dr Yvonne Skipper, at Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk.

If you are concerned about any aspect of how this research is conducted, please contact the Convenor of the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Dr Muir Houston at Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Hana Butorova

Diary Study Consent Form

Title of Project:

A diary study exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme and their perceptions of its benefits

Researcher: Hana Butorova, h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper, Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk

If you agree to take part in this research study, then please read the following statements and sign your name below.

- *I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.*
- *I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.*
- *I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my relationship with Citywise or with the University arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.*
- *I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym and all names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.*
- *I understand that both my diary entries and interview recordings as well as other information recorded will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.*
- *I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.*
- *I understand that anonymised results may be used in future publications, both print and online.*
- *I understand that I can contact the researcher for this project by e-mail to receive more information and/or a summary of the anonymised group level results.*

I **agree / do not agree** (circle) to take part in the above study.

I **agree / do not agree** (circle) for interviews to be audio-recorded.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Hana Butorova

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Pre and Post Interview Questions

Pre Interview

Before beginning: chat with the participant, establish rapport, offer tea and coffee depending on room location

Part 1: Explanation of the diary-keeping schedule and the study as a whole

1. Explanation of study (the participant will have heard everything before and seen the below forms already)
2. Hand out Plain Language Statement, ask the participant to take time to closely read this
3. Ask the participant if they have any questions. Explain all of the steps of the diary study:
 - a. Pre interview
 - b. Diary-keeping period
 - i. Short weekly reflections
 - ii. More detailed in-depth reflections
 - c. Post interview
4. Answer any questions or concerns the participants may have.
5. Provide examples of some of the diary prompts to participants, if they are interested (see "Diary Study Prompts"). Explain what reflective writing means and answer any questions participants may have about the diary element of the study.
6. Hand out Consent Form, ask participant to take time and consider this
7. Participant signs the Consent Form if they are happy to participate

Confirm that the participant is okay with the interview being audio-recorded. Begin recording.

Part 2: Pre Interview

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. This interview will aim to begin discussing your motivations and expectations for the Citywise programme. I will start by asking you how and why you started volunteering, and then ask you about any expectations you have about the programme going forward. There are no right or wrong answers, I am just interested in hearing your perspective. Feel free to talk as little or as much as you would like, to ask for clarification about any question, to pass any questions you do not want to answer or to jump back if you remember something else you would like to say about a previous question. Is that okay? Do you have any questions now?

1. How did you get involved in the Citywise mentoring programme?
 - a. Why did you want to volunteer? Why with young people? Why as a mentor?
 - b. Why Citywise?
 - c. In deciding to come, what did you want out of the programme?
2. What do you expect will be the best thing about mentoring with Citywise?
 - a. What do you expect to like about mentoring?

- b. What effect do you expect the mentoring will have on the young people you work with?
 - c. What personal benefit to you expect this will have?
 3. What challenges do you foresee?
 - a. What might be the most difficult thing for you with mentoring?
 4. How do you expect your relationship with your mentee to go?
 - a. How do you expect the process of pairing up to go?
 - b. What do you think will come easily to you?
 - c. What do you think will be difficult for you?
 - d. How do you expect your relationship to develop?
 - e. What kind of relationship do you imagine you will have?
 5. How do you feel about the fact that you will be mentoring in the framework of a larger group, with 11 or 12 other mentoring pairs there?
 - a. How might your relationship with your mentee be affected by the rest of the group?
 - b. How might your experience of the programme be affected by this?
 - c. How might the fact that most of these mentors will be fellow university students affect this?
 6. How do you feel about the fact that you will be mentoring within a structured format, with sessions following a curriculum and led by a project leader?
 - a. How do you expect your relationship with your mentee to be affected by the structured curriculum?
 - b. How might your experience of the programme be affected by this?
 - c. How might the fact that the curriculum is focused on character and inner strengths affect your own self-reflection?
 7. Is there anything else you'd like to add in terms of your motivations and expectations for mentoring?

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions. The recording will not be shared with any third parties, and will be stored securely. I will keep it to match your reflections here to your reflections during the year and to a final interview at the end of the year, where you will be able to look back and compare your expectations to how it all was for you.

Even though you are currently taking part in this study, you are free to withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason. This will not affect your relationship with me, with Citywise or with the University in any way.

Please keep the Plain Language Statement and get in touch with me, my supervisor, the Convenor of the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, or the Citywise Safeguarding officer at safeguarding@citywise.org if there is anything that you would like to discuss further.

Post Interview Structure

Before beginning: chat, offer tea and coffee depending on room location

Thank you so much for continuing your participation in the study until now, I am very grateful for all the time and energy you have invested in this so far.

Confirm that the participant is okay with the interview being audio-recorded. Begin recording.

Post-Diary Interview

Thank you again for agreeing to sit down with me for an interview. This interview will aim to reflect on your experience of the Citywise programme as a whole and on the process of keeping a diary while mentoring.

I will start by asking you how and why you started volunteering, and then ask you about any expectations you have about the programme going forward.

There are no right or wrong answers, I am just interested in hearing your perspective. Feel free to talk as little or as much as you would like, to ask for clarification about any question, to pass any questions you do not want to answer or to jump back if you remember something else you would like to say about a previous question. Is that okay? Do you have any questions now?

1. Tell me a bit about your year. What have you been up to? (General warm up question)
2. What has been your experience of mentoring in Citywise this year?

Prompts:

- a. What did you do?
- b. How much of your time, energy or thinking did it take?
- c. What were some of the best things about mentoring?
- d. What came naturally for you to do?
- e. What were the most challenging things?
- f. What were some of the most significant moments?

Additional prompts relating to experience of the programme depending on content in diary entries (Ask to elaborate)

Also additional prompts relating to experience of the programme based on themes highlighted by other participants, but perhaps not by this participant (If such themes exist and are relevant)

3. *Question(s) about social dynamics and relationships in the project, based on preliminary analysis of themes from diary entries. E.g. Characterise your relationships with others in your project. In what ways have you influenced each other?*
4. *Question(s) about mentor-mentee relationship, based on preliminary analysis of themes from diary entries. E.g. How would you characterise your relationship? How might your view and your mentee's view differ? How did your relationship change over the year?*

How did your relationship end? How was your relationship with your mentee affected by the structure of the programme and by the rest of the group?

5. What was the effect of the Citywise programme on your mentee?
 - a. How did it shape their identity, reflection and self-knowledge?
 - b. How did it shape their attitudes to learning?
 - c. How did it shape their emotional and social wellbeing?
 - d. How did it shape their prosocial behaviour?
 - e. How else did it affect their character?
 - f. Can you think of any particular virtues that were most developed in your mentee?

Additional prompts relating to mentee character growth depending on content in diary entries (Ask to elaborate)

Also additional prompts related to ways the mentee perhaps did not grow, based on themes highlighted by other participants, but perhaps not by this participant (If such themes exist and are relevant)
6. To what would you attribute this change?
 - a. Which sessions or elements contained in the programme do you think affected this change?
 - b. Which did not?
 - c. The curriculum has seven stages: self-knowledge, growth mindset, goal setting, resilience, self-control, good judgement and fairness. How well do the effects observed in the children map onto the structure of the curriculum?
 - i. Which parts of the curriculum, due to their content or good timing, were key in affecting change?
 - ii. Which parts of the curriculum least resonated with your mentee?
 - iii. Which parts of the curriculum could have been delivered better? What would you change about their delivery?
 - iv. Which parts of the curriculum were ill-timed, because they could have come earlier or later for a better effect?
 - v. How would you restructure the curriculum to make it better?
 - d. *Additional prompts relating to aspects of the programme affecting change, based on content in diary entries*
 - e. *Also additional prompts relating to aspects of the programme affecting change, based on themes highlighted by other participants, but perhaps not by this participant (If such themes exist and are relevant)*
7. What are the effects of mentoring in this programme on your personal development?
 - a. How has it shaped your identity, attitude to learning, wellbeing and prosocial behaviour?
 - b. Can you think of any particular skills that you have developed?
 - c. Can you think of any particular virtues that you have developed?
 - d. To what would you attribute this change?
8. What has been your experience of keeping this diary?
 - a. What was it like to be filling in the weekly reflections? What was it like to be filling in the detailed reflections?

- b. How much did you enjoy this process? Which questions did you find most difficult to answer? Were you ever tempted to drop out?
 - c. How did your experience of this process change over time?
 - d. What effect did writing these reflections have on you?
 - e. Which questions were key in terms of this effect?
- 9. How might your reflections have been influenced by the fact that I was going to read them?
 - a. How aware were you that you were not writing this only for yourself?
 - b. Did you feel free to write about anything and everything?
 - c. What would you change about the questions and the process?
- 10. How did the experience of mentoring overall compare with your expectations?
 - a. What was fulfilled and what was not?
 - b. What would you recommend to somebody else thinking of joining the programme?
- 11. *Additional prompts based on content of diary entries (Ask to elaborate)*

Thank you again for all the time you dedicated to this study, and thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. The recording will not be shared with any third parties, and will be stored securely.

As always, if this brought up anything that you would like to discuss further, please get in touch with me, my supervisor, the Convenor of the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, or the Citywise Safeguarding officer at safeguarding@citywise.org.

A short guide to reflective writing

- Reflective writing includes analysing or examining an event or experience, considering your thoughts and emotions as well as the meaning or impact that these may have had. Please try to be reflective and not just descriptive in your entry.
- There is no one way to do this, but below are some things to consider

Description

- What happened?

Emotions

- What were you thinking and feeling?
- I was surprised that...
- It didn't work as I expected...
- I especially enjoyed...
- I struggled with...
- I found myself thinking about...
- I was relieved when...
- I found it funny when...
- I didn't want to appear uninterested, so I...

Evaluation

- What was good and bad about the experience?
- Two stars and a wish method
- Perhaps next time...
- I particularly valued...

Analysis

- Where can you find meaning in what happened?
- What sense can you make of the situation?
- I think my mentee learned...
- As a result, I find it more helpful to...

Diary Study Prompts

Hosted on Online Surveys

Short Weekly Reflections

Hello and thank you for agreeing to help me with this project about exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme.

This weekly reflection should only take a few minutes. It is meant to be written on the day of the session, so please try to complete it as soon as you can after the session finishes. If you do not manage to complete it on the day, do not worry, just complete it as soon as you are able to.

There are no right or wrong answers, we are only interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings and experiences of the programme. I only ask that you try not to use any names (for example of your mentee) but to use pseudonyms or their role (e.g., my mentee), to help preserve anonymity.

- *Email Address (edited to be: Pre-population parameter, so that this is auto populated and links entries from the same person to each other)*
- *Today's date*
- *Session number/topic*
- ***Please reflect on the session you attended today (approx 300 words). Please remember: Reflective writing includes analysing or examining an event or experience, considering your thoughts and emotions as well as the meaning or impact that these may have had. Please try to be reflective and not just descriptive in your entry.***

Thank you for taking the time to complete the above reflection.

The information provided will not be shared with any third parties and will be stored securely, unless there is any evidence of risk of harm to yourself or others, in which case I will be obliged to discuss this with relevant authorities.

Your email address will be used as an identifier to match this entry with your other entries. This will also be used for the final interview, where you may be asked to elaborate on some of the reflections you have provided. At the end of the study all identifying information, including your email address will be removed from the data to ensure it is anonymous.

Even though you are currently taking part in this study, you are free to withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason. This will not affect your relationship with me, with Citywise or with the University in any way.

Final page:

Thank you very much for filling this in!

If completing this reflection has brought about anything that distresses or concerns you, please get in touch with your project leader, with myself or with the Citywise Safeguarding Officer at safeguarding@citywise.org

Hello and thank you for agreeing to help me with this project about exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme.

This in-depth reflection will take you approximately 20-30 minutes.

It is meant to be completed within a week of having been sent to you. Please take time to think about your answers, but no need to over-analyse!

There are no right or wrong answers, we are only interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings and experience of the programme. You can use as many words as you would like!

In-Depth Reflections

Hello and thank you for agreeing to help me with this project about exploring mentors' experiences of a character-focused mentoring programme.

This in-depth reflection will take you approximately 20-30 minutes.

It is meant to be completed within a week of having been sent to you. Please take time to think about your answers, but no need to over-analyse!

There are no right or wrong answers, we are only interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings, and experience of the programme. You can use as many words as you would like!

- *Email Address*
- *Today's date*

The curriculum

- ***Please reflect on your experience of the character-focussed curriculum in the programme. What do you think about it? You can reflect on significant events or activities, positive or challenging aspects of the curriculum, your expectations, frustrations or anything else that is a significant part of your experience.***

Social dynamics

- ***Please reflect on your interaction and relationship with your mentee(s), and on the development of this interaction.***

- ***Please reflect on interactions within the group (group “geling”), including the whole group, subgroups and horizontal (child-child and mentor-mentor) and vertical (child-mentor) relationships, and the development of these interactions.***

Children’s character development

- ***Please reflect on the character development of the child(ren) you have been working with.***
- ***To what do you attribute any changes you have observed in your mentee(s)?***
Note: Again, there are no right or wrong answers, please simply share your opinion on this!

Your own development

- ***Please reflect on your own growth since the beginning of the programme.***

Thank you for taking the time to complete the above reflection.

The information provided will not be shared with any third parties and will be stored securely, unless there is any evidence of risk of harm to yourself or others, in which case I will be obliged to discuss this with relevant authorities.

Your email address will be used as an identifier to match this entry with your other entries. This will also be used for the final interview, where you may be asked to elaborate on some of the reflections you have provided. At the end of the study all identifying information, including your email address will be removed from the data to ensure it is anonymous.

Even though you are currently taking part in this study, you are free to withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason. This will not affect your relationship with me, with Citywise or with the University in any way.

Final page:

Thank you very much for filling this in!

If completing this reflection has brought about anything that distresses or concerns you, please get in touch with your project leader, with myself or with the Citywise Safeguarding Officer at safeguarding@citywise.org

Appendix C

Study 2 Supplementary Materials:

- C1. Ethical approval
- C2. Permission from Glasgow City Council
- C3. Permission from organisation
- C4. Focus group schedule
- C5. Information sheets, privacy notice, and consent forms

College of Social
Sciences**College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

31 March 2021

Dear Hana Butorova

Project Title: Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Application No: 400200132

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: 16/04/2021
- Project end date: 01/12/2024
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the *College Ethics Review Feedback* document that has been sent to you as the Collated Comments Document in the online system.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research:
(https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf)
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Approval is granted for virtual methods outlined in the application however restrictions noted below should be followed for any face to face data collection methods.
 - ◆ **Approval has been granted in principal:** no data collection must be undertaken with the exception of methods highlighted above until the current research restrictions as a result of social distancing and self-isolation are lifted. You will be notified once this restriction is no longer in force.

Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The **Request for Amendments to an Approved Application** form should be used:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/>

Yours sincerely,



Dr Muir Houston College Ethics Officer

Research Access Request Notification

RESEARCHER NAME	Hana Butorova
PROJECT TITLE	Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme
REQUEST STATUS	Approved ☒ Refused ☐
COMMENTS (IF APPLICABLE)	• Although permission for research access has been given by the research group it is still very much up to the Head of Establishment to decide whether or not they participate and assist you in your research. Please note the additional pressures faced by schools due to COVID-19 may impact on their availability to participate. Schools also reserve the right to withdraw from the project at any time if they are no longer able to participate. • A copy of this letter should be forwarded to the establishment when contacting them to request their participation. • Opt-in consent must be used in all circumstances. This is in line with GDPR regulations. • Any personally identifiable data collected from participants must be done so within GDPR guidelines.



To Hana Butorova

Support for PhD research project

This letter confirms support for the PhD research project outlined as follows:

Project Title:	Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme
Name of researcher:	Hana Butorova
Designation:	PhD Student (Education)
Organisation:	University of Glasgow
Address:	St Andrews Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow G3 6NH
Email:	h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk
Overall aim:	Explore how children who are involved in the WISE Mentoring programme, aimed at fostering wellbeing, personal development and character growth, experience and perceive the programme, to understand the personal benefits of mentoring on character and youth development.
Methodology:	Focus groups with children in Primary 6 and Primary 7.

I confirm that WISE Mentoring grants approval for the proposed research projects. We expect rigorous adherence to ethical standards and safeguarding procedures and emphasise the necessity of securing parental consent / children's assent throughout the research process.

Signed:	
Name:	JOWITA SZYSZKA
Position:	Director
Date:	29.04.2024

Draft of Focus Group Plan

Chat with children as they are coming in, before the focus group begins.

1. Introduction and verbal consent

Written consent will already have been given both by parents and by children. Still, the purpose and procedures of the study will be explained to children verbally and consent will be recorded:

Hi, how is everyone? My name is [assistant researcher name] and today I'm hoping that you'll let me ask you some questions about what it's like to be in WISE.

I would like to ask you these questions because I am doing a project about WISE, and I am interested in learning more about what you think of WISE.

Before we start, I'm going to explain what we will do if you decide to join. We will have a group interview, which is called a focus group. In the focus group, I will ask you questions about WISE. I will ask you what you like and what you don't like so much, about how you get on with your mentor, and about what you think you have learnt from being in WISE.

This focus group is about WISE. So although I will ask you about your experience, I am not trying to find out information about you or your mentor! I am trying to learn more about what you think of WISE and what it's like to be in WISE.

You can say "pass" (shake head) if you don't want to answer a question, and you can ask me "sorry, what?" anytime you don't understand something. Take time to think before your answer but remember that there are no right or wrong answers. In this focus group, you are the experts, not me. In fact, I want you to say what you don't like because that will help to make WISE better!

We want to have a nice conversation together, so let's take turns talking. I'd like to hear everybody's ideas! Please be nice and considerate and don't make fun of each other. If you're okay with it, I will record the focus group. Don't worry though; nobody else will hear it except for Hana. I will record it just so I can write down what you think later, and when we finish this project, we will destroy the recording!

I will also ask you to draw pictures of what you like and dislike and do a few short activities, which might help you think of new things you want to say. You don't have to do these if you don't want to. Please don't use people's names and instead say things like 'a person and I had lots of fun in the drawing activity' rather than 'Jack and I ...'

You all wrote your name on a sheet to say that you want to talk to me about WISE, and your [mom/dad/carer] say that it's okay for you to do this focus group with me. But if you don't want to do it, you don't have to. I won't be upset, and no one else will be upset either. And if we start talking and you don't want to talk anymore, that's also okay. Just let me know if you feel uncomfortable and you can leave the group.

Do you have any questions about this focus group?

Would you like to do this focus group with me? Can I record it? Are you ready to begin?

2. Icebreaker

Say name and colour/food/character strength starting with the same letter (several rounds).

Practice saying “pass” – Ask each other questions from an icebreaker questions list. Whoever is asked can either answer or say “pass”.

Role-reversal exercise – Take the recording device, click record, ask the researcher a question about the project. Alternatively, if children have no questions, ask anybody a question about their day (e.g., what did you have for lunch today?). You can listen back to the recording from the device.

1. Focus Group Questions

1. GENERAL EXPERIENCE

- a. *Simple, descriptive:* What happens in WISE?

Prompts

- i. What does a WISE session look like? What do you do?
- ii. What is it like to be a part of the group?
- iii. What do you learn at WISE/What is the purpose of WISE?

- b. *Drawing activity:* Draw your favourite and least favourite thing about WISE, then explain your drawing to me.

(See Angell, Jo, & Hunt, 2015; Mayaba, Nomakhwezi, & Wood, 2015)

Prompts

- i. What do you like about being in WISE? (follow up with why they liked it/disliked it)
- ii. What do you dislike about being in WISE?
- iii. How could we make it even better?

2. MENTORING EXPERIENCE

- a. What is it like to have a mentor?

Prompts:

- i. What kind of a relationship do you have with your mentor?
- ii. *Does your mentor understand you? Do you trust your mentor? Can you talk about important things with your mentor?*
- iii. What was your relationship like at the beginning of the year? How has it different now? How had your relationship changed and developed?
- iv. How important is your mentor to you? How important do you think you are to your mentor?

- b. What are some examples of things you enjoy doing with your mentor(s)?
- c. What are some of the things that you dislike doing with your mentor(s)?

- d. How does your mentor help you?
- e. Are there things that your mentor(s) could do to help you more?

3. GROWTH, CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

- a. What is something you will remember from WISE?

Prompts

- i. Mentor relationship? Activities? Character strengths/skills?

- b. What have you learnt in WISE?

- c. **Draw how you are different now than when you started WISE**

Prompts

- i. What have you learnt about yourself?
- ii. What have you learnt about [topic of project child has been in: *self-knowledge / growth mindset / goal setting / resilience / self-control / good judgement / fairness / connection / recovery / emotions*]?

- d. What skills or knowledge did you develop in WISE?

Prompts

- i. Think about skills that will can you a better friend
- ii. Think about skills that can help you in school
- iii. Think about skills that can help you in your relationships with your mum/dad, brothers/sisters
- iv. Think about skills that can help you transition to secondary school
- v. Think about skills that can help you in the community

- e. What character strengths did you develop in WISE?

Prompts

- i. Think about the different strengths from your Wisebook (*Show them a page of their own work*)
- ii. Can you think of any strengths that you did not have at the beginning of the year, but that you have now?
- iii. How do you think you developed them?
- iv. What strengths did you find most difficult to grasp/understand/grow in?**

4. CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

- a. If you could change one thing about WISE, what would it be?

Prompts:

- i. Would you take any part of it away?
- ii. Would you add anything?
- iii. Would you change any of the topics?

- b. Is there anything else you would like to say about WISE?

3. Thank you

Okay, that's the end of the focus group!

Thank you so much for speaking to me about WISE!

If you have any other questions about my project, you can ask me now, or later. You and your [mom/dad/carer] all have Hana's email address on the sheets, so you can email her or speak to the headteacher if you have any other questions or if you want me to not use any of your answers in my project. Thanks guys, that's all!

General notes:

Useful phrases:

Tell me more about

That's so interesting...

And what is there about the....

And how is that.....

And when.... what next...

What do other people think about...?

Concrete questions, open-ended questions, don't double questions.

Information Sheet

Title of Project: Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Researcher: Hana Butorova, h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper, Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk

Children participating in the WISE Mentoring programme are being invited to take part in a study about it. Please read the following information and discuss it with your child before deciding whether or not you give your consent for participation.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of children participating in different WISE projects that aims to support children's resilience, wellbeing and character.

What is involved in participating: There will be a 30-minute focus group in which children will be asked what they like and dislike about the project, and about their experiences of it. This focus group will take place towards the end of the project.

Benefits and risks of participating: This will be an opportunity for children to reflect on a project aimed at helping them unlock their potential and grow in strengths. This may enhance the benefits of the project, and lead to improvements in the WISE programme. We do not expect the study to constitute any risk to your child, as no sensitive issues will be discussed and they will be asked questions related to the programme. However, if something distressing is brought up, appropriate support networks are in place and we will inform you as well as the school health and wellbeing lead.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You and your child may refuse to take part without having to give a reason to me. This will have no impact on their participation in the WISE programme. Additionally, up to 2 weeks after the focus group, you have the right to request that I not use any of the collected material.

Confidentiality and data use: The focus groups will be recorded and transcribed into text, where they will be made anonymous and analysed for themes about the WISE programme. Once the study finishes, all recordings will be deleted and anonymised research data will be stored for ten years in accordance with GDPR. Any quotes from the focus groups used in published documents including my PhD thesis will use pseudonyms. Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, although due to WISE being a small organisation, it may be impossible to guarantee, and if during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform the school safeguarding officer of this.

Further Information: This study has been reviewed and agreed by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow and Glasgow City Council's Research Access Group. If you have any further questions about the study, feel free to contact me, Hana Butorova (h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk) or my supervisor, Dr Yvonne Skipper (Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk). If you would like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have a concern or complaint about the conduct of the research, contact the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics Lead (socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk).

Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project: Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Researcher: Hana Butorova

Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project: Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

Why we need it

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and your child's name in order to conduct our research. We need the name and signature to confirm that your child may participate in the study, and to potentially follow-up on the data, for example if you want to withdraw or wish to be sent a summary of the anonymised results.

We only collect data that we need for the research project and once the study finishes, data will be anonymised and all personal information, including recordings from which children could be identified, will be deleted.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, although due to Citywise being a small charity, it may be impossible to guarantee, and if during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform the school safeguarding officer of this. Please see accompanying **Information Sheet**.

Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research, we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories of data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study. Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit is processed by the researcher who is a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe: secure storage, encryption of files and password-protection of folders, anonymisation and pseudonymisation for any published documents. Please consult the **Consent form** and **Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

Anonymised data may be used a variety of published documents, including journal articles and conference papers and will be shared with other authenticated researchers only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information. If requested, we can provide you with a summary of the anonymised group results and details of any publications or outputs.

What are your rights?*

GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see [UofG Research with personal and special categories of data](#).

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact dp@gla.ac.uk

Complaints

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee or relevant School Ethics Forum in the College.

How long do we keep it for?

Your **personal** data will be retained by the University only for as long as is necessary for processing and no longer than the period of ethical approval (01/12/2024). After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your **research** data will be retained for a period of ten years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.

End of Privacy Notice _____

Consent Form

Title of Project: Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Researcher: Hana Butorova, h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper, Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk

If you give consent for your child to participate in this study, then please acknowledge the following statements and sign your name below.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions;
- I understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and that me and my child can withdraw at any time without having to give a reason;
- I acknowledge that data will be kept in secure storage at all times, recordings will be deleted once the project is complete, and transcripts will be anonymised and kept for ten years in accordance with GDPR;
- I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this anonymised data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form;
- I understand that participants will be referred to by pseudonym and no information that identifies my child will be made publicly available;
- I understand that participation in this project is for the purposes of research, and is in no way an evaluation of me or the child as an individual;
- I understand that I can contact the researcher(s) for this project; by e-mail to receive more information and/or a summary of the anonymised group results.
- I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I **consent / do not consent** (circle) that my child can participate in this study

I **agree / do not agree** (circle) for focus groups to be audio-recorded.

.....
Name of Parent//guardian

.....
Signature

.....
Date

.....
Name of researcher

.....
Signature

.....
Date

Information Sheet For Children

**Title of project:**

Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Researcher: Hana Butorova

Supervisor: Doctor Yvonne Skipper

Hi, my name is Hana. I am doing a research project about WISE.

A research project is a way to learn more about something.

I would like to invite you to talk to me about the WISE mentoring sessions.

Take time to decide if you would like to talk to me! Please read my answers to all of the questions on this sheet carefully. You can read the sheet with your parent or carer.

1. Why are you doing this research project?

I am doing this research project to find out what you think about WISE.

2. Why did you invite me?

I invited you because you are part of the WISE mentoring group this year.

3. What will happen if I decide to talk to you?

If you decide to talk to me, I will organise a time where you and I and a few other children will meet together. Then I will ask you all some questions. The questions will be about WISE. If I ask a question that you don't want to answer, you don't have to answer it. We will talk together in a group for about 1 hour. I will record your answers so that afterwards I can listen carefully to what you said.

4. Do I have to talk to you?

No, you do not have to talk to me. You can still be in WISE if you don't want to talk to me! You can also change your mind. If we start talking and you decide that you don't want to talk to me anymore, just let me know.

5. What will happen to the information I give you?

I will record what you say. I will keep the information in a locked file on my computer. When I write about what I have found in my research project, I will not mention your name. If you like, you can choose another name for me to use when I am writing about what you said. No one else will know which name you have chosen.

However, if I hear anything that makes me worried that you might be in danger, I might have to tell other people who need to know about this.

When I have talked to everyone who decides to talk to me, I will write about what I have learned in a thesis. A thesis is a very long essay, almost like a book, which I have to complete for my course. My teachers at university will read and mark my thesis. I might also give presentations to other people to tell them what I found out and write reports for them too. I will also tell you and the other children who have talked to me what I have found out about the WISE club. I will destroy all of my notes and recordings when the project is finished.

7. Are you allowed to do this research project?

Yes, I am. The College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow and Glasgow City Council both gave me permission.

8. What if I have more questions?

If you have any more questions about my research project, you can ask me. You or your parent or carer can email me. My email is:
h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk.

You can also email my supervisor, Doctor Yvonne Skipper. Her email is:
Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk.

Or you can email the Ethics Officer at the College of Social Sciences. His email is:
Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

Consent Form
For Children**Title of Project:**

Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

I would like to hear what you think about the WISE sessions so we can improve it in future

- You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.
- You can stop talking to me at any time.

Do you want to talk to me about WISE?

Please put a circle around your answer.

**Can I record our chat?**

Please put a circle around your answer.



Can I use some of the things you say in my reports? I will not use your name so people will not know which words are yours, and which words other children have said.

Please put a circle around your answer.



Please write your name in the box below.

Appendix D

Study 3 Supplementary Materials:

- D1. Questionnaire
- D2. Ethical approval
- D3. Permission from Glasgow City Council
- D4. Permission from organisation
- D5. Information sheets, privacy notice, and consent forms



QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT YOU

How you think about your goals, about
yourself and about your feelings

Your First Name:

Your Last Name:

Your Age:

Your Gender:

Your School:

Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.

Remember that you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to.

Part 1: Questions About Your Goals

The sentences below describe how children might think about themselves and how they do things in general. Read each sentence carefully before answering.

For each sentence, please think about how you are in most situations. Then, put an 'X' in the one box that best matches your answer.

Remember there are no right or wrong answers.

		None of the Time	A Little of the Time	Some of the Time	A Lot of the Time	Most of the Time	All of the Time
1.	I think I am doing pretty well	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.	I am doing just as well as other kids my age	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.	When I have a problem, I can come up with lots of ways to solve it	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.	Even when others want to quit, I know that I can find ways to solve the problem	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Part 2: Questions about You

How much do you agree with the sentences below?

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	I have a lot of friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.	I do very well in my class work at school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.	I am better than others my age at sports	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.	I am happy with myself most of the time	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.	I hardly ever do things I know I shouldn't do	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6.	I really like the way I look	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7.	All in all, I am glad I am me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
8.	I want to make the world a better place to live	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.	I accept responsibility for my actions when I make a mistake or get in trouble	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10.	I enjoy being with people of a different race.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11.	When I see someone being taken advantage of, I want to help them	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12.	When I see someone being picked on, I feel sorry for them	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13.	When I see another person who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for them	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14.	I receive a lot of encouragement at my school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15.	I am a useful and important member of my family	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16.	I feel like an important member of my local community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
17.	I feel my friends are good friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Part 3: Do these sentences match your feelings?

		YES!	yes	no	NO!
1.	Other people decide what happens to me	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.	It is important to think before you act	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.	If I study hard, I will get better results	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.	When I try to be nice, people notice	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.	If you work hard, you will get what you want	☐	☐	☐	☐
6.	To make a good decision, it is important to think	☐	☐	☐	☐

		YES!	yes	no	NO!
7.	I am responsible for what happens to me	☐	☐	☐	☐
8.	Sometimes you have to physically fight to get what you want	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.	I get angry easily	☐	☐	☐	☐
10.	I do whatever I feel like doing	☐	☐	☐	☐
11.	When I am angry, I yell at people	☐	☐	☐	☐
12.	Sometimes I break things on purpose	☐	☐	☐	☐
13.	If I feel like it, I hit people	☐	☐	☐	☐

Part 4: How true are these sentences about you?

		Not true	Not really true	Not Sure	A little true	True
1.	I'm not very sure of myself	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.	I really don't like myself very much	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.	I sometimes feel so bad about myself that I wish I were somebody else	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.	I usually feel I'm the kind of person I want to be	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.	I feel I can do things as well as other people can	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6.	I feel that I am a special or important person	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7.	I feel that I am really good at things I try to do	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

That's it - thank you so much for helping me by filling this in! Your answers are important and will help me complete my research project.

College of Social
Sciences**College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

21 October 2021

Dear Hana Butorova

Project Title: An evaluation of the effects of a character-focused youth mentoring programme**Application No:** 400210029

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: 22/10/2021
- Project end date: 01/12/2024
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the *College Ethics Review Feedback* document that has been sent to you as the Collated Comments Document in the online system.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: (https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf)
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Approval is granted for virtual methods outlined in the application however restrictions noted below should be followed for any face to face data collection methods.
 - ◆ **Approval has been granted in principal:** no data collection must be undertaken with the exception of methods highlighted above until the current research restrictions as a result of social distancing and self-isolation are lifted. You will be notified once this restriction is no longer in force.

Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The **Request for Amendments to an Approved Application** form should be used:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/>

Yours sincerely,



Dr Muir Houston College Ethics Officer

Research Access Request Notification

	RESEARCHER NAME
	Hana Butorova
	PROJECT TITLE
	An evaluation of the effects of a character-focused youth mentoring programme
	REQUEST STATUS
	Approved ☒ Refused ☐
	COMMENTS (IF APPLICABLE)
	• Although permission for research access has been given by the research group it is still very much up to the Head of Establishment to decide whether or not they participate and assist you in your research. Please note the additional pressures faced by schools due to COVID-19 may impact on their availability to participate. Schools also reserve the right to withdraw from the project at any time if they are no longer able to participate. • A copy of this letter should be forwarded to the establishment when contacting them to request their participation. • Opt-in consent must be used in all circumstances. This is in line with GDPR regulations. • Any personally identifiable data collected from participants must be done so within GDPR guidelines.

22nd August 2020

Re: Permission for research project

This letter confirms that Citywise Mentoring Ltd supports Hana Butorova's PhD research on "Exploring character-focused mentoring as a means of facilitating character growth and Positive Youth Development (PYD) in middle and late childhood" at the University of Glasgow.

Many thanks,



Luke Wilkinson
Chief Executive

Information Sheet

Title of Project: An evaluation of the effects of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Researcher: Hana Butorova, h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper, Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk

Children in Primary 6 who are participating in the Citywise/WISE mentoring programme and who will get a chance to participate in the mentoring programme next year are being invited to take part in an evaluation research project about it. Please read the following information carefully before deciding whether or not you give your consent for participation.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of the study is to measure whether the programme has any effect on how children think about themselves and their character.

What is involved in participating: In this study, children will be asked to complete a questionnaire with tick-box questions about their self-belief, goals, control, self-esteem, connection and character. This will take approximately 20 minutes (each) at two different times, first in October and then in June.

Benefits and risks of participating: This evaluation will help lead to improvements in the Citywise/WISE programme. We do not expect the study to constitute any risk to your child.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You and your child may refuse to take part without having to give a reason. This will have no impact on their participation in the Citywise/WISE programme. Children can also refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of them in the questionnaires.

Confidentiality and data use: The questionnaires will be de-identified. This means that names will be replaced by a code so we can match them over time. Once the study finishes, all identifiers will be deleted and the data will be anonymised. This will be stored for ten years in accordance with GDPR. Other authenticated researchers will have access to this anonymised data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form. Please note that confidentiality will be respected subject to legal constraints and professional guidelines.

Further Information: This study has been reviewed and approved by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow. If you have any further questions about the study, feel free to contact me, Hana Butorova (h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk), my supervisor, Dr Yvonne Skipper (Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk), or the headteacher of your school. If you would like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have a concern or complaint about the conduct of the research, contact the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project: An evaluation of the effects of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Researcher: Hana Butorova

Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project: Exploring children's experiences and perceptions of a character-focused youth mentoring programme. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

Why we need it

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and your child's name in order to conduct our research. We need the name and signature to confirm that your child may participate in the study, and to potentially follow-up on the data, for example if you want to withdraw or wish to be sent a summary of the anonymised results.

We only collect data that we need for the research project and once the study finishes, data will be anonymised and all personal information, including recordings from which children could be identified, will be deleted.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, although due to Citywise being a small charity, it may be impossible to guarantee, and if during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform the school safeguarding officer of this. Please see accompanying **Information Sheet**.

Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research, we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories of data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study. Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit is processed by the researcher who is a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe: secure storage, encryption of files and password-protection of folders, anonymisation and pseudonymisation for any published documents. Please consult the **Consent form** and **Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

Anonymised data may be used in a variety of published documents, including journal articles and conference papers and will be shared with other authenticated researchers only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information. If requested, we can provide you with a summary of the anonymised group results and details of any publications or outputs.

What are your rights?*

GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see [UofG Research with personal and special categories of data](#).

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact dp@gla.ac.uk

Complaints

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter. Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee or relevant School Ethics Forum in the College.

How long do we keep it for?

Your **personal** data will be retained by the University only for as long as is necessary for processing and no longer than the period of ethical approval (01/12/2024). After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your **research** data will be retained for a period of ten years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.

End of Privacy Notice _____

Consent Form

Title of Project: An evaluation of the effects of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Researcher: Hana Butorova, h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper, Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk

If you give consent for your child to participate in this study, then please acknowledge the following statements and sign your name below.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions;
- I understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and that me and my child can withdraw at any time without having to give a reason;
- I acknowledge that data will be kept in secure storage at all times, recordings will be deleted once the project is complete, and transcripts will be anonymised and kept for ten years in accordance with GDPR;
- I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this anonymised data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form;
- I understand that no information that identifies my child will be made publicly available;
- I understand that participation in this project is for the purposes of research, and is in no way an evaluation of me or the child as an individual;
- I understand that I can contact the researcher(s) for this project by e-mail to receive more information and/or a summary of the anonymised group results.
- I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

My child **can / cannot** (circle) participate in this study

.....
Name of Parent//guardian

.....
Signature

.....
Date

.....
Name of researcher

.....
Signature

.....
Date



College of Social
Sciences

Information Sheet For Children



Title of project:

An evaluation of the effects of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

Researcher: Hana Butorova

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Skipper

Hi, my name is Hana. I am doing a research project about the Citywise/WISE club, which some children in your class will go to this year.

A research project is a way to learn more about something.

I would like to invite you to answer some questions. The questions will be printed in a questionnaire on paper and you will tick a box to give your answers.

I will ask you the same questions two times. The first time will be in October and the second time will be at the end of the school year.

1. Why are you doing this research project?

I am doing this research project to find out if the Citywise/WISE club helps children think about their goals and about themselves in a different way.

I am going to ask some questions to lots of different children. I am curious to know if the way all of the children think about these things will be different at the end of the year.

2. Why did you invite me?

I invited you because you are in Primary 6.

3. What will happen if I decide to do this?

If you decide to take part, you will fill out the questionnaire with other children at a time during the school day.

The questions will be about your goals, about you and about your feelings.

If you read a question that you don't want to answer, you don't have to answer it.

Your parent or carer will also let us know if you can do the questionnaire, but even if they say you can, you do not have to.

4. Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part. You can still be in Citywise/WISE if you don't want to answer the questions! You do not have to take part in the interview with me either.

5. What will happen with my answers?

I will collect all the sheets of paper. Then I will change your name to a secret code so that when I am reading the answers, I will not know which ones are yours!

I will keep the answers in a locked cabinet and in a locked file on my computer. When I write about what I have found in my research project, I will not mention your name.

After I collect answers from lots of children in Glasgow, I will write about what I have learned in a thesis. A thesis is a very long essay, almost like a book, which I have to complete for my course.

My teachers at university will read and mark my thesis. I might also give presentations to other people to tell them what I found out and write reports for them too. But nobody will know what you personally have answered.

I will also tell you and the other children who answered my questions what I have found out. I will destroy all of the information when the project is finished.

7. Are you allowed to do this research project?

Yes, I am. The College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow reviewed it.

8. What if I have more questions?

If you have any more questions about my research project, you can ask me. You or your parent or carer can email me. My email is:
h.butorova.1@research.gla.ac.uk.

You can also email my supervisor, Doctor Yvonne Skipper. Her email is:
Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk.

Or you can email the Ethics Officer at the College of Social Sciences. His email is:
Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information sheet!

Consent Form
For Children**Title of Project:**

An evaluation of the effects of a character-focused youth mentoring programme

I would like to invite you to answer some questions in a questionnaire.

- The questions will be about how you think about your goals and about yourself
- You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.
- I am asking the same questions to everybody in Primary 6. I am asking children who are in the Citywise/WISE club this year and children who are not in it this year.
- There are no right or wrong answers and nobody will know what you answered.

Do you want to join in this research and fill in a questionnaire?

Please put a circle around your answer.



Please write your name in the box below.