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Practice article

Freire for twenty-first-century, austerity-driven schools: creating positive educational relations with and among students at the margins

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Abstract

Despite the rhetoric of successive governments in England to engage all students with their learning there has been a substantial increase in suspensions and permanent exclusions from secondary schools since the early 2000s. This removal of students from school is particularly high among underperforming students, most of whom come from low-income families. These concerns, amplified by well-being and mental health issues related to the lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, accelerated government calls for new and innovative approaches to re-engage students with education. Particular emphasis is placed on mentoring and tutoring projects. This article discusses a relational pedagogy employed in the initial stages of a mentoring project called Beyond the School Gates that emerged from a research study carried out by the University of Portsmouth in 2018 and was established as a charity association in 2020. Specifically, it analyses the

mentoring processes that draw on Freire's decoding model to create relational spaces within excluded students' homes in order to facilitate critical dialogue between mentors, students and their parents. Mentors facilitate relational encounters that involve mutual dialogue and a series of relationship-building activities so that students are able to voice their social realities and educational experiences. Students depict their circumstances in image metaphors or art forms, some of which are illustrated. These frame conversations about their educational and social developmental interests, needs and goals. Mentors then facilitate activities that help the students develop confidence and the skills necessary to access resources to meet these needs and realise their goals. This extends to facilitating conversations between students, parents and teachers in order to address social and curricular barriers in school.

Keywords education; suspension; exclusion; mentoring projects; tutoring projects; Paulo Freire; decoding model; relational encounters

Introduction: a focus on mentoring projects

For an increasing number of students transition into secondary school is unsuccessful, resulting in school exclusion and low academic attainment. This is despite the pledges of successive governments in England to engage all students with education. Indeed, there has been a substantial increase in suspensions (fixed-term exclusions) and permanent exclusions from secondary schools, of underperforming students in particular, most of whom coming from low-income families (Department for Education [DfE], 2015, 2018; Education Datalab, 2015) or having special education needs and disabilities (SEND) (DfE, 2019; Edwards, 2018; Farouk, 2017). Often these factors coincide and place students at disadvantage.

Disadvantage, as Crenna-Jennings (2018) from the London Policy Institute points out, is understood in relation to educational attainment between these students and their peers where educational attainment not only forms part of a set of socio-economic inequalities in life outcomes but is also a product of how families perform in relation to these inequalities. In line with Reay (2017), Crenna-Jennings adds that disadvantage also often coincides with a broader range of conditions, including SEND, ethnicity, geography, socio-economic status and the measure used by which disadvantage is defined. Disadvantage therefore constitutes a complex set of conditions in which students' self-narratives are embedded and by which they are also conditioned to act (Arendt, 1958).

It is not therefore defined a priori by students or their parents but rather by policy and institutional practices and policy narratives that these students encounter within school classrooms and sites. Thus, in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1985), forming points of resistance as notions of maladjustment to, or deviance from the processes created within the textures of policy initiatives, such as completing classroom assignments, working in silence when asked or adjusting to transmissive styles of teaching, coincide with the personal or social practices aligned to the maintenance and construction of their wider narratives (Giddens, 1991). Moreover, Farouk (2017) and Farouk and Edwards (2021) found that, consequently, this can lead to students not meeting behavioural or educational attainment expectation levels and facing increased possibility of academic failure, suspension and exclusions. This can induce extreme existential anxiety, as the students' narrative becomes fractured (Edwards, 2018; Farouk, 2017; Giddens, 1991).

Indeed, the concerns raised in relation to increasing numbers of these students experiencing school suspensions and exclusions were amplified by well-being and mental health concerns as students started to transition back to school following the first Covid-19 lockdown (National Youth Agency, 2020). Moreover, a turn towards zero-tolerance behaviour policies that correspond with micro-surveillance of student grade outputs with a narrow academic curriculum supported by more traditional pedagogies has had little effect on suspensions and permanent exclusions. Although falling during and immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic, these remain a concern as they start to increase again (DfE, 2022b).

Addressing this issue is not easy because DfE (2016) policy states that schools should not just keep students on the school registers who have received suspensions and are at risk of permanent exclusion, but should also provide much of the students' education themselves rather than finding alternative providers. In addition, they should maintain a broad and balanced curriculum (DfE, 2016) and high grade outputs. In practice though, this task is often handed over to alternative education providers, although the students remain on the sending school's register. The benefit of seeking alternative providers is that they can take more informal approaches, but this can be at the cost of reduced or alternative curriculums and inconsistent standards of delivery (DfE, 2018, 2019).

However, a pedagogic gap has emerged that may offer a way forward that lies between mainstream schools' incapacity to facilitate the learning of these students within their current teaching practices that are results-driven and exam-orientated and the autonomy to develop their own pedagogies (DfE, 2016). More recently, and to address this issue, academic and peer mentoring and tutoring has been encouraged, particularly as students started to transition back to school from the first Covid-19 lockdown. For example, the National Tutoring Programme is now embedded in current education policy (DfE, 2022a). Here, the aim is to facilitate educational relations between adult or student peer mentors and students in schools whose grade outputs have been most impacted upon by the pandemic. Many of these students are from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Yet this can become counter-productive, as it actually inhibits some students' academic knowledge acquisition by separating them from the family and social relationships in which their sense of ontological security and future-orientated self-narrative is being managed (Giddens, 1991). Although this is also managed in the school context, the primary focus on cognitive outputs can limit the development of the more holistic self-narrative. Moreover, where the determinants of student disadvantage meet education policy enacted in classroom practices, these dominant discourses legitimise some cultural, social and knowledge capitals while illegitimising others. Hence, although the recent move towards employing mentoring programmes in schools post Covid-19 aims to create more accessible pathways to knowledge acquisition, its discursive power is maintained as it legitimises the self-narrative as a duality.

However, it is in this policy gap, and a renewed interest in mentoring approaches and calls for more social justice approaches to education, that this article discusses a relational pedagogy employed in a youth mentoring project called Beyond the School Gates (BSG). Located in a small seaside town in the south-east of England, BSG is a youth charity established in 2020. It emerged from a participatory research study carried out by the University of Portsmouth in 2018. The initial research phase is detailed in an article by Edwards et al. (2021), which outlined the processes of training formerly excluded students and their parents as qualitative researchers to listen to and analyse the lived experiences of current excluded students and their parents. The current mentoring intervention extends the initial phase to support additional students and their families as well as those participating in the original study. This article presents a case study example to focus on the processes employed in the opening stages of the intervention in which positive educational relations are established with a student (Leoni) and her parents (Jess and Paul) in the family home. This had the effect of enabling Leoni to identify and develop the skills and confidence to access resources in order to meet some of her education and developmental needs, and Paul and Jess the skills to support her in this process.

Background: mentoring is nothing new but there are problems

Relational-focused mentoring approaches that support disadvantaged students at the margins of education are not new. There has been a long-standing interest in relational pedagogies that guide mentoring initiatives in informal education (Jeffs and Smith, 1987, 2010) and alternative provisions (Edwards, 2018; Hinsdale, 2016). Prior to the National Tutoring Programme, this interest had already extended to the formal education sector nationally and internationally (Benade, 2015; English, 2016; Vlieghe, 2016) albeit primarily from a theoretical perspective. This coincided with renewed international interest and calls for alternative and 'socially just' pedagogies (Hinsdale, 2016; Roberts, 2012) that re-engage students with their learning (Hope and Montgomery, 2016) – particularly for disadvantaged students. Much of this work, albeit not reflected in the National Tutoring Programme, was informed by Freire's (1972, 2005) ideas that consider the role of educator as a dialogic process maintained within a relationship in which knowledge is co-constructed and reciprocal. Here, the educator and

student become conscious of their position in relation to the world and their realities and in relation to one another.

In particular, there has been renewed interest in Freire's (1972) decoding model. In principle, this model enables learning to develop through dialogue between the educator and student. The educator actively seeks to become aware of and listen to the student's voice; that is, their conceptual understanding of the reality in which they live and learn. Students' knowledge is developed in the processes of becoming aware of and verbalising their position within their social worlds. Critically, it is within this context and process that knowledge becomes meaningful. That is, it supports their social and cognitive development as an indivisible project – the holistic self-narrative.

However, in the formal education sector discussions are bounded by classroom and curricula requirements that focus on cognitive outputs within narrow knowledge domains. This limits the meaningfulness of cognitive knowledge acquisition in relation to its application to students' wider social worlds and narratives. Hence, addressing the above-mentioned policy gap is not easy if mentoring approaches aim to achieve this goal and also address growing well-being and mental health concerns.

To contextualise the above-mentioned discursive positioning of disadvantage that coincides with the emergent conditions in which students' self-narratives must be maintained, Giddens's (1991, 1998) and Bauman's (2000) post-modern analyses of Western social conditions might be considered. Bauman (2000) asserts that the gradual discarding of Western social boundaries and fixities of the past, such as the nuclear family, rites of passage, class-based systems and structures, the position and role of meaning-making institutions such as churches, schools and universities, which framed one's life conditions and world view, has led to a reframing of notions of individual freedom. Here emerges 'an individualised, privatised version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders' (Bauman, 2000, p. 8). A condition in which the individual is left in chronic existential anxiety (Giddens, 1991). Students who are unable to adopt the rewarding master-narrative (enacted in schools) of gaining permanent employment and financial success are left to feel further marginalised and insecure as a result of having a broken narrative about their lives. For them, formulating new routines of normality that sustain a viable self-narrative (Giddens, 1991) and subsequently ontological security has become critical.

This is because it is through the constant and daily maintenance of relationships with significant others that a precarious balance between existential anxiety (of non-being) and ontological security (of knowing who one is in relation to others) is managed. These fluid relationships are managed through dialogue and social activities that maintain the self-project (Bauman, 2000). Therefore dialogue, in the Freirean sense, whether between student and peers or student and teacher, cannot just be an exchange of words, but must involve the whole person – in a social process.

However, this hegemonic shift is not easily mirrored by teachers' classroom practices that are bounded by policy, which primarily serve the economic needs of the state rather than those of the individual (DfE, 2016). Here, notions of individual identity and personal liberty stand juxtaposed to education policy and classroom practices in which a neoliberal notion of student identity is at play. They are viewed primarily as units of economic capital to be offered as a self-brand in the employment marketplace – 'a walking advertisement, a manager of her own résumé' (Mirowski, 2014, p. 108), thus, rendering the student as an object to be shaped and acted upon in the classroom for the benefit of economic outputs rather than as agents of their own volition. Therefore, for students who already encounter the illegitimising discourses of disadvantage and face academic failure through suspension and exclusions, these competing cultures in the classroom remain problematic within current mentoring programmes – even when they extend beyond the classroom into more informal spaces.

The mentoring processes discussed in this article therefore seek to address this issue by paying particular attention to the initial (1–12 weeks) stages of the intervention that create space for relational encounters and recognise students as distinct yet indivisible from their social and familial conditions.

Methodology

Theoretical framework

The mentoring processes draw on Giddens's (1991) assertions about the construction of the self-narrative and are positioned within Buber's (1923, cited in Kaufmann, 1970) epistemological claims that education is the fundamental capacity by humans to encounter others and their environment as subject. Here,

knowledge of one's self and the other is realised and emerges within the realities within which each are immersed. Methodologically, the processes are framed by Freire's (1972) decoding model that creates the discursive and relational conditions within which students can become critically conscious of their realities. That is, their position in relation to the world and the conditions in which they exist, thus enacting Freire's notion of conscientisation.

In practice, formerly excluded students and their parents who have been trained as mentors create relational spaces within excluded students' homes that facilitate critical dialogue (framed in Freire's decoding model). Here, the mentors and student encounter one another's presence; a subjective process that views the other beyond politically legitimised objective and bounded policy discourses that separate knower from agent. Student self-narratives are not seen as static, fixed nor finitely objectively observable, but rather as managed indivisibly within the transitional and transactional relations with significant others (Braidotti, 2019; Giddens, 1991). Therefore, with the consent of the students, the mentoring process extends to supporting their parents or guardians. Thus, the mentor becomes significant to the student and their parents as a trusted and relational other within the collaborative production of the student's individual as well as their parents' narratives (Giddens, 1991).

Mentors facilitate Freire's decoding model in weekly sessions that last approximately one hour and as students, parents and mentors become conscious of their existence in relation to one another and others (including school teachers), the student starts to re-orientate their self-narratives and identify educational and life goals that support this process. This can include employment, further or higher education and social-emotional developmental goals. They are then supported by the mentors, within the professional standards of youth work and social pedagogy practices, to develop the skills and confidence to access resources they need to achieve these goals. In practice, this process also extends to supporting the student and their parents via advocacy work to identify and address barriers (personal or systemic) to accessing the educational resources they need to achieve their goals. As such, they also negotiate the power relations encountered at the above-mentioned confluence points of resistance (Foucault, 1985).

Professional practice framework

The mentoring processes reflect youth work and social pedagogy principles of informal education and voluntary participation that take an asset- and, strengths-based rather than a deficit approach (see Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2020; Social Pedagogy Professional Association, 2022). The mentors and trustees have special school teacher, youth work, head teacher and Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills' (Ofsted) inspectorate qualifications and experience and lived experience of exclusion. Hence, the governance of the project ensures the operational framework is maintained within national and internationally recognised professional and academic research standards.

The mentoring processes remain unchanged from those employed in the initial research phases that were peer reviewed and approved by the author's (who is also lead mentor) university ethics committee and are guided by two aims: to listen to the experiences and perceived needs of excluded secondary school young people and their parents; and to collaborate with participants and partner organisations to develop an intervention that helps participants to draw on their own and wider resources to meet their developmental, well-being and education needs.

A central question draws on the above-mentioned theoretical underpinnings to assume student perceptions of a meaningful education and the processes of exclusion are located within wider familial discourses that inform a future-orientated and collaboratively produced self-project (Edwards, 2018; Farouk, 2017; Giddens, 1991). It asks: How do excluded students and their parents frame their experiences of education and the processes of exclusion in relation to their future aspirations and educational goals?

Methods

The aims are enacted through participant action research (PAR) methods outlined fully in Edwards et al. (2021). Here, active involvement is required by each participant in a problem or set of practices. It is often conceptualised as a cyclical (Edwards et al., 2021) or spiralling process involving reflexive planning, observing, reflecting and acting (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2007). In line with Payne and Bryant (2018) and the National Youth Agency (NYA) and Social Pedagogy Professional Association (SPPA)

principles of practice, the mentoring processes in this project involve stakeholders in every aspect of the intervention, including analysis, development of subsequent activities and dissemination of findings through presentations at conferences. It is these processes that represent and illustrate students' and their parents' conscientisation, as beings-in-progress.

For the purposes of this article one case study example is examined in depth. Issues encountered are representative of students' and their parents' educational experiences across the wider participant cohort, some of which are broadly discussed in Edwards et al. (2021). Data was gathered using a mixed-methods approach (Edwards and Brown, 2021) that enabled a range of comparable qualitative and quantitative data to be considered in relation to one another and to create a broader understanding of the process outcomes. Data collection included evaluation discussions, statistical data (Likert scales), images, vignettes and session evaluations. A case study example is used, as it provides a deeper exploration into the processes and issues encountered by the student, Leoni, paying particular attention to image metaphors that emerge from dialogue within relational encounters. Here, Leoni mediated the world that depicted her circumstances and framed the totality of her experiences in images that guided subsequent mentoring initiatives. The impact of these processes is evidenced in Leoni and her parents developing the confidence and skills to access the resources to help Leoni meet her academic and social development needs.

Recruitment, consent and ethical considerations

Students aged 11–16 years are invited to participate in the mentoring process. This age range coincides with formal education Key Stages 3 and 4 in secondary schools in England and extends to support students as they transition to and complete sixth form education. Exclusion is understood as suspension (temporary up to six days) or permanent exclusion and also extends to self-exclusion, such as school refusal.

At the time of writing, eleven males and four females with an average age of 13.5 had been supported. Six of these students had SEND diagnoses at the time of encounter with BSG and three students were later diagnosed with SEND following BSG mentoring interventions.

Most of the students had previously also encountered Children and Adult Mental Health Service (CAMHS), social services, education welfare officers and police services. Specific issues that students encountered that become exacerbated at points of resistance in schools (and also coincided with these service interventions) included sexual and physical assault, county lines drugs involvement, parental break-up, illness, mental health issues, medical issues, poverty that impacted mental health and family relationship breakdown.

Parents and students are signposted by organisations (social services, school special education needs co-ordinator [SENCO], CAMHS), word of mouth or local authority local offer to the BSG administrator. This enables them to access support of their own volition and mitigates some of the coercive or conditional nature of application by referral. The mentoring lead contacts the parent to arrange a meeting with them and the student at the family home. They discuss the student's exclusion status and clarify the purposes of mentoring processes. The mentoring lead also assesses students' willingness to participate, as parents can assert pressure on their child to do so. This ensures that student and parental participation is undertaken, as much as possible, on a voluntary basis. However, although traditional youth work practice in England works primarily with students autonomously from parents, it is not uncommon for students to request that at least one parent joins them in these sessions. This is because they distrust adults other than those with whom they live – regardless of family relationship issues.

Consent and assent (students under 16 years) is taken and includes, but is not conditional to, consent/assent to publish and disseminate findings in order to promote their experiences and concerns. They also consent to meet for one hour weekly for an initial 12 weeks in order to facilitate Freire's (1972) decoding model. This can extend for up to 24 months until the student and parent/s have developed the skills and confidence to access the resources they need to meet their needs and transition to further or higher education or employment.

Mentors work in pairs during this stage in the family home. One mentor has lived parental experience of school exclusion and the other has either lived student experience of school exclusion or has experience working with excluded students. These requirements help sensitise mentors to the parents' and students' experiences. Professional training and guidance is sourced via an umbrella youth

organisation affiliated to the NYA. Safeguarding, child protection and general data protection regulation requirements and operational processes are overseen by BSG trustees. During Covid-19 lockdowns and transitional phases from lockdowns in the period 2020–1, the mentoring work took a hybrid online video call/social distanced face-to-face approach. All sessions are conducted in compliance with UK government and, specifically, NYA operational guidelines.

Evaluating impact

Mentor session evaluations record details and outcomes for each session and students and their parents are asked to complete an evaluative questionnaire and interview after the initial 12-week period. Questions explore student motivation, education goals and self-confidence before and after this mentoring stage and enables the participants to decide whether to continue or to end the intervention at that point.

Creating positive educational relations at the margins: a case study

Student: Leoni

Leoni is a working-class white British female, currently (at the time of writing) aged 15. She lives with her mother (Jess) who is unemployed and has some mental health issues that have been previously supported by counselling, and her elder sister aged 18, who is also unemployed and a recluse following issues with her own schooling that occurred five years ago. Leoni's father (Paul) attends most of the sessions but does not live in the family home. He is a self-employed gardener. Social services were previously involved with the family but this de-escalated to early help team support just prior to (but unrelated to) the intervention.

Leoni was permanently excluded from mainstream school and attended a pupil referral unit (PRU) for an initial transitional 12-week period pending reallocation to another alternative provision. However, she was on the register at the PRU for over two years, at which time she refused to attend following consecutive exclusions. At this point mentoring support was requested by Jess via the website link after being signposted to it by a friend. Jess had informed Leoni's social worker of the intervention request and Leoni had agreed for the social worker to meet the mentors during the first visit.

However, during this introductory session the mentors noted in their evaluation (12 October 2021) that Leoni stayed in her bedroom for 40 minutes before joining the mentors who were waiting to meet her in the lounge downstairs. She then entered the room with a pet snake around her neck but started talking openly about herself. The mentors questioned in their evaluation whether this entrance was to make a statement about who she was or whether the snakes created a barrier for Leoni to avoid being asked questions that may make her feel vulnerable. Nonetheless, subsequent mentoring sessions enabled Leoni to voice her intent. (The length of time supported by mentors at time of writing was 12 months. There is some overlap in discussions between sessions that merged some of the stages of the decoding process.)

Stage 1 (session 1): developing generative words

Activity

The student and their parent/s are asked to write words on Post-it notes that come to mind when they see a range of pictures. Here, the student's self-narratives are understood to be reflexively engaged with their family members and under constant revision (Giddens, 1991) yet indivisible from these transversal modes of assemblage. Pictures focus on education but not exclusion in order to prompt discussion rather than focus on pre-assumed issues. Pictures include a school site, classroom, signs with the words 'education', 'the good life (now)', 'the good life (future)', 'help and support'. Students and parents are asked to write their feelings or thoughts about the pictures on Post-it notes. These are placed on the pictures and provide a starting point for the student and parents to name (or signify) their realities (Freire, 1972).

Findings

Leoni remained in her bedroom for 30–40 minutes before joining the mentors in order to put her makeup on, rather than refusing to participate. Paul and Jess were present and talked about Leoni's prior activities at the PRU while they and the mentors waited for Leoni to join them. This discussion continued as Leoni entered the room; she then added to and developed the conversations and readily wrote words on Post-it notes and attached them to the pictures (Table 1).

Table 1. Words attributed to pictures (20 October 2021).

Pictures	Words by Leoni	Words by Jess	Words by Paul
1. Education	Shit	Struggle, trust (relating to Leoni's perceived experiences)	Early enforced knowledge
2. Help and support	Don't listen, untrustworthy	Not a great help, never believe, just want to get rid of Leoni	Nobody listens or follows up
3. Image of school site	Sick, anxiety, bunch of bullshit, don't want to do it	I worry that Leoni will have a very bad day	Institution
4. Back to school	Feel restless	Feel unsettled, waiting for phone to ring	Pressure, expectation of strife
5. Student writing in classroom	Rubbish, don't want to write	I know Leoni will get anxious over this	Don't believe in long homework, child needs downtime
6. Teacher teaching in classroom	Depends on person or lesson	Leoni will fall out with teachers and walk out	Poor buggers
7. Good life (now)	Dad not whinging, not worrying about school, sister getting over her anxiety, allowed to see my niece, Dad not being a knob	No struggles and Leoni being happy	Leoni to fit into society but still be happy
8. Good life (future)	Get a job at 16	Leoni to be confident in herself and feel she can achieve things	Leoni to know who she is, be happy with herself and function in society

Analysis

Here, family discourses were framed around Jess and Paul's perceived experiences of Leoni's encounters with school. There is evidence of fractured relationships between Paul and Leoni (picture 7) yet a desire for her to be happy and succeed in school (picture 8). Paul used his own value base as a lens through which to project his interpretation of Leoni's experiences (pictures 4 and 5), whereas Jess drew on her emotional attachment as primary care giver to project her perception of Leoni's experiences (picture 5).

Leoni's naming of her reality seems to have contradicted her parents' (particularly Paul's) perceptions of her narrative as understood by her parents – those significant others with whom her self-narrative had become fractured (Giddens, 1991). Here, points of contention, or resistance, were becoming evident within the home as she named and shared her reality (Freire, 1972). Both Paul and Jess, however, felt extremely anxious with anticipation of negative outcomes as Leoni went to school (picture 4). Underlying causes of issues were not evident at this stage, as a unifying conceptual framework that signified their interrelations within the self-narrative was not yet clear.

Stage 2 (sessions 2–3): totalising or situationalising the issue

Activity

Mentors, the student and their parent/s discuss the meaning of the words written on the Post-it notes. Mutual understanding cannot be assumed as the subjective self becomes signified through language emerging from these reciprocal relations that represent the perceived real. Parents share and discuss their experiences with students and encounter each other in new ways. In this sense, the student's experiences of exclusion become totalised within the broader and pre-existing but now emerging interrelation of systems that inform their self-narratives.

Findings

On arriving at both of these sessions, the mentors found Leoni already sitting in the lounge with Jess. In session 2 Leoni readily discussed the generative words that she had written the previous week in order to develop a totalising conceptual framework. She then shared and explained a digital image (Figure 1) that she had created just prior to the mentoring sessions that framed her feelings at this point.

Figure 1. Under the gaze of professionals (Source: Leoni).



Leoni explained that she felt constantly under the gaze of professional people and that nothing was private any longer. Yet she also stated that she wanted to discuss her experiences with the mentors, perhaps reflecting the voluntary process- and student-led approach that had enabled her to share her thoughts. This reflection was strengthened the following week when the image was brought to the forefront of discussion again. Jess explained that Leoni had subsequently disclosed an assault that she had experienced a year ago. Jess and Paul had previously been unaware of this but had since supported Leoni in making a statement to the police and informing the PRU and social services who were now offering support. Further, Jess noted that the assault had coincided with her sudden negative and disruptive behaviours at the PRU and at home. Jess, Paul and Leoni then shared their experiences and understanding of Leoni's actions over the last year.

Leoni and Jess then discussed Leoni's recent transfer from the local PRU to a site further afield. Leoni explained that she had not been asked whether she wanted to attend this new site and argued that no one listened to her (Session 3, 2 November 2021). This was also recorded in her session 1 Post-it notes – 'Don't listen/untrustworthy'. Nonetheless, she said her experience was positive as there was only one other student present due to the others being on a school trip. This happiness soon deteriorated though when she was told to complete a baseline test: '[Leoni] said she had struggled with being locked in a small room with a teacher and told she had to do a baseline test though and had walked out just before the teacher had locked the door' (Session 3, 2 November 2021). Leoni quickly moved the conversation

towards the nature of patriarchal cultures in England, stating that young people and particularly girls are oppressed and can be victimised and not listened to. The session recording noted:

This led to a discussion on race and Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech and the work of Rosa Parks. It was clear, and Mentor X noted, that Leoni has a very strong sense of social justice and allies herself to people in similar positions as her perceived situation. (Session 3, 2 November 2021)

This conversation led to mentors revisiting the final two pictures from stage 1 that included good life (now) and good life (future) as well as the words on the Post-it notes that Leoni had written. Leoni's vision of a good life now was one with less family crisis, at which point she explained a range of incidents that had happened in the family that had also included social services involvement. She explained that she had suspected that the boyfriend of a family member was being abusive to this member but no one had listened. She added that she did not want to go to the new PRU site but, again, said that teachers had not listened to her. However, she also discussed a future goal, which was to run a pet shop. She showed the mentors some online research she had carried out exploring local pet shops and gaps in the local market.

Analysis

Different conversations coincided here – the experiences shared by Leoni, Jess and Paul that were consummated within open discussions, and the subjective reality that was starting to be expressed by Leoni. They were encountering each other in a way that they had not done previously and entering each other's presence with new understandings. Moreover, they were each becoming consciously aware of, rather than assuming understanding of, their own and each other's realities. Here, Freire's (1972) concept of conscientisation was emerging as Leoni's experiences of educational exclusion were now becoming totalised within the broader and pre-existing and complex interrelation of systems that informed each of their self-narratives.

Stage 3 (sessions 4–5): decoding the issue and generating new themes

Activity

Mentors discuss their understanding of the issue by drawing on their own lived experiences of school exclusion in order to 'split' the totality of the now coded situation into themes. This helps them identify with and sensitise them to the student and/or their parents' experiences in order to discuss with them how each theme interacts. Mentors start to become trusted collaborators and co-creators of new beginnings in the emerging narrative. They become a significant other to the student and the parents (Giddens, 1991) within that process. Students and their parent/s emerge as subjects according to their manner – that is, indivisible yet distinct from the transversal modes of assemblage within which their experiences are being lived. Educational relations are now enacted as a reciprocal process of mutual collaboration within these assemblages and have become a dialogic process that names emerging realities that encompasses each participant's self-narratives, which are now becoming orientated towards new opportunities for becoming (Giddens, 1991).

Findings

The mentors continued to discuss the generative words and totalising situation in the fourth session and at the end of the session the mentoring lead asked Leoni if she would like to create another digital image over the following week to use as a metaphor for her situation, to which she agreed. In between these sessions one of the mentors, a mum whose daughter had experienced school exclusion and similar issues to Leoni, drew on her own and her daughter's experiences of exclusion to sensitise herself to the generative words and session recordings and summarised her reflections:

Leoni is very aware of the world and the need to conform to fit in. She has a shit sleeping pattern making it hard to get up and leaves her feeling restless. She appears to have given up on others as she believes that the only person she can trust in is herself ... she admits that she finds it hard to focus at school and that she will walk out of lessons and school when she gets

frustrated ... she doesn't feel that she has a voice or that her voice is heard. Leoni discussed society and how things are presented as naked bringing out peoples' insecurities ... people are not accepted and feel judged if they are not skinny ... everything has a whiteness but with no face and ... everything is an object conformed by society. It appears that she just lives day to day. (Mentor reflections, 5 December 2021)

The mentor identified key themes that emerged:

1. Faceless/speechless but all Leoni can do is listen to others talking about her
2. Sleep paralysis
3. Fragile space
4. Shout out for help but no one can hear you
5. Feel safe but trapped at the same time
6. Leoni wants freedom – escape. (Mentor reflections, 5 December 2021)

On arrival at the next session though, Leoni was already sitting in the lounge waiting for the mentors to arrive and immediately shared a positive experience she had encountered during the week in relation to her formal education: 'She had done a 1-2-1 tutor session with a maths tutor in McDonalds today and had found it very easy and enjoyed it. She also said she enjoys having a laugh with and talking to the Head of the X APCs' (Session 5, 7 December 2021).

Here, Leoni had started to develop and seek out positive relations with teachers at her PRU, although it was unclear how the mentoring processes had supported this. However, as the mentor shared the summary of her reflections with Leoni, Jess and Paul, Leoni presented an image that summarised the totality of her experiences that corresponded with the emerging themes and reflective summary.

Figure 2. The asylum (Source: Leoni).



The mentors noted the following:

She [Leoni] explained that the asylum is the room in which she believes her life has been placed, and that has been created by organisations, and in particular school, through their constant surveillance of her ... Mentor X asked what the creature meant, to which Leoni explained it was her fears that crawl up and threaten her at night ... it was the sleep paralysis and she feels as though she is living in a bubble of reality that feels unreal. She added that the crying eyes in the image were tears that she wakes up with sometimes. (Session 5, 7 December 2021)

The image (Figure 2) provided some understanding in relation to Leoni's actions that would be explored in subsequent sessions but at present it was not clear how this process had impacted her motivation to attend a maths lesson and complete work or talk and laugh with the PRU head teacher.

Analysis

The educative processes and relationships being experienced between the mentors, Leoni and her parents were being enacted as reciprocal and relational processes of mutual collaboration. Leoni was experiencing Buber's (1961) claim that 'only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about' (p. 66). Yet, within this meeting between her parents and mentors, perhaps a renewed sense of ontological security had emerged that reduced her existential anxieties and thus motivated Leoni's actions (Giddens, 1991). This perhaps also accounted for her enthusiasm to develop new relationships in the PRU. Nonetheless, Leoni's encounters with mentors managed within the assemblage of reciprocal and transactional relations within the family site were enabling her to emerge as subject according to her manner yet indivisible from these relations. The emergence of Leoni as subject according to her manner supported by a sense of ontological security was perhaps, and in line with Bauman's (2000) earlier assertions, extending to her wider education relations as it could not be bounded nor contained within the family context. Hence, the self-narrative managed within the previously illegitimated conditions of disadvantage that encountered in the school site was now being negotiated and revised with staff in order to overcome these points of resistance.

Stage 4 (sessions 5–7): re-codifying the issue

Focus

The emerging and re-orientated narrative is discussed and clarified with the student and parent/s and the student asked to summarise their current situation and educational experiences in a metaphorical image. The image is created by either the student or mentors and can vary in its complexity; yet it helps the student become consciously aware of their situation in its totality. Once created this image is used as a starting point to further orientate activities, interventions and educational discussions at the next stage. Hence, the manner of the subjective self is now signified through language emerging from these reciprocal relations (the emerging themes); representing the perceived real (in the Husserlian sense).

Activities

The processes of Stage 4 had already started in the previous session with the presentation and discussion around Leoni's digital image but this now extended into sessions 6 and 7. It was now clear that although Leoni had initially shared some future goals (in the introductory session on 12 October) these did not correspond with the totalising image that Leoni had now developed. They were now unrealisable and, perhaps, an illusion of hope that was not grounded in the current reality. Nonetheless, they offered hope for escape:

It became apparent that she is unable to imagine a future or beyond her current state of mind.
(Session 5, 7 December 2021)

However, Leoni was now realising her situation and had started to access counselling support through CAMHS. She was also discussing positive social activities rather than mentoring problems and had also completed some of her school work at home. Her attendance at the PRU had, however, deteriorated due to being moved to another site. The PRU had subsequently forwarded a letter to Jess over the Christmas break outlining their concerns about Leoni's attendance. This had led to considerable family conflict and stress over Christmas. The mentors offered to meet with PRU leaders and teachers and advocate with Leoni, Jess and Paul in order for her concerns and experiences to be shared, and academic and developmental support sourced to aid Leoni's changing situation.

Leoni agreed to attend the meeting and share her feelings about her situation. She was becoming open to mentor guidance that would help her access the resources she needed to meet her education needs and to also avoid harm within her complex social relationships. The mentors noted:

Leoni then discussed the help she is able to see through friends who are glamorising suicidal thoughts and depressive episodes. Mentors said they were pleased that she is aware of this when it happens and suggested she creates some personal distance to these people so that she doesn't get drawn in. To do this they suggested signposting support helplines to these friends that Mentor X would forward to Jess. (Session 7, 5 January 2022)

The mentors drew Leoni's attention to the totalising image and explained that although she was helping peers through their experiences due to her feelings of being trapped, quite often people tended not to look after themselves and could encounter triggers that escalate their own mental health issues. The mentors affirmed her visits to CAMHS and also helped her start to think about how she could move out of the asylum that she felt trapped in.

Analysis

The above realisation of her situation offered some explanation as to why Leoni was trying to develop positive relationships with the PRU head teacher and attending maths lessons, which had deteriorated as she was then moved to a new PRU site. This had disorientated her emerging self-narrative but as the mentors reflected with Leoni on her totalising image she was able to re-codify and make sense of the issues she faced. Leoni was able to see the issues that she now needed to overcome, which she could also achieve within the emerging reciprocal relations established between the mentors, herself and her parents.

Stage 5 (sessions 7–12): conscientisation – transforming the situational context

Focus

Student, parents and mentors consider how they might act upon the questions and issues that are now problematised by the totalising image. Action becomes with rather than on students and their parents in order to transform their situation and create new opportunities for the student's academic and social development. The processes enable positive education relations to form that affirm the student as subject within family, mentor and wider relations. Here, the student and their parent/s develop the skills and confidence to identify and address some of the conditions of their existence that frame the discourses of disadvantage.

Activity

In session 6 Leoni, Jess and Paul had discussed with the mentors how they might act upon the questions and issues that were now problematised by the totalising image. Here, a key issue was that Leoni not only felt comfortable within her current situation (notably, refusing to attend the PRU) but also wanted to escape the limitations of staying in the house as this restricted her access to future goals. Subsequent sessions therefore drew on activities that helped Leoni develop the skills and confidence to access the support services and express her concerns with appropriate adults who could help her, such as teachers and counsellors. The sessions also helped her explore opportunities to develop her interests in reptiles and business in preparation for making a transition from school to work. Activities included the following.

- Visiting a pet shop to ask about work experience placements
- Advocating with Leoni to teachers as she shared her experiences and voiced her concerns yet also listened to and discussed teachers' responses
- Supporting the family to arrange visits to a farm, zoo and wildlife centre
- Liaising with Jess and CAMHS worker to access support for Jess and Leoni
- Sourcing GCSE maths and English books that Leoni and Paul worked through together.

Personal counselling was subsequently offered by the PRU teachers as well as a revised teaching timetable that allowed flexibility on her attendance as well as increased art sessions. The PRU SENCO also visited the family home in order to support Leoni with home-based school work, which she had now started to complete. Leoni also regularly accessed counselling support.

Analysis

The above outcomes evidence Leoni's developing confidence to act upon the conditions of her reality as her conscientisation of these conditions emerge. However, conscientisation is not understood as simply the naming of one's world but extends, as seen with Leoni's actions, to acting on this reality to address the disadvantaging conditions at points of resistance in the school site and her wider social world that restrict the development of her collaboratively produced self-narrative.

Discussion: conscientisation as a collaborative process

It is not possible to quantify specific causal impacts of encounters on specific educational or developmental outcomes and this is not the purpose of this article. Rather, it evaluates and discusses the perceived (by each participant) impact of the mentoring on the processes of conscientisation that Leoni, Jess and Paul evidenced above and which led to development of motivation, skills and confidence to support Leoni to access her education and developmental needs.

To meet this end, Leoni and her parents were, as with all participants, asked to complete an evaluation form and interview 12 weeks after the start of the sessions. Questions were based on how they each felt before and after the 12-week period. Responses were recorded on a Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5), with 6 as unsure. Leoni was asked questions relating to herself and Jess and Paul were asked questions related to Leoni. Table 2 below records these answers.

Table 2. Participant responses.

Questions	Leoni		Jess and Paul	
	before	after	before	after
1. Clear education goals (for Leoni)	6	2	4	2
2. Confident Leoni can (can help Leoni) achieve these goals	5	2	4	1
3. Leoni motivated to do well in school work	5	2	5	2
4. Leoni is self-confident	4	2	5	2
5. Awareness of obstacles Leoni may encounter achieving education goals	4	3	1	2
6. Feel equipped (to help Leoni) overcome these obstacles	4	2	5	2

The discussion in which these questions were asked captured qualitative responses:

- Skills or knowledge you feel you have improved as a result of BSG support?
 - Don't snap as much, conversation has improved and explain things more now. Recognise meaning in pictures. (Leoni)
 - I learned how to back off. (Paul)
- What was the most useful thing about BSG support?
 - It's good to have a chat with someone, it helps get the weight off your shoulders. (Leoni)
 - Helped us communicate with her. (Jess and Paul)
 - Just liaising with the school and just support as you are when I was panicking over the fine. You got the teacher to explain it. (Jess)

Here, Leoni, Jess and Paul indicated a significant shift in Q1. clarity of education goals; Q2. confidence; Q3. motivation; and Q6. ability to (help Leoni) achieve these goals. However, Jess and Paul indicated that before the sessions they strongly agreed (1) that they were aware of the obstacles that Leoni may encounter accessing these goals (Q5). However, as they became more aware of Leoni's reality they now agreed with this (2) showing less awareness. Moreover, Leoni disagreed with the statement before (4) but neither agreed nor disagreed (3) afterwards.

It is possible that this shift in perception by Jess and Paul coincided with their gradual understanding that they were not fully aware of underlying issues that Leoni was encountering that were framed within her image metaphors. Moreover, Paul noted above that he learned to 'back off' with Leoni and both Jess and Paul noted above that they were more able now to 'communicate with her'. Here, the processes of conscientisation extended to Paul and Jess as they reflected on Leoni's comments and their own realities. This was a key issue that is noted in Stage 1 (see picture 7 comments in Table 1) as well as in Stage 2 recording that she thought no one listened to her. Each was now becoming more consciously

aware of the other as subject as they encountered each other in new ways during the sessions. The points of divergence within their relationships were becoming (sometimes painfully) evident. Yet the desire to maintain and build relationships remained evident and motivated them to negotiate the issues and re-construct their narratives accordingly from a new confluence point – a point from which new becomings and future-orientated self-narratives could emerge together (Giddens, 1991).

Leoni also evidenced an emerging critical consciousness of herself (Freire, 1972) as subject within the assemblage of reciprocal relations that she seems not to have recognised previously ‘I recognise the meaning of pictures’. This enabled her to not only respond to her own developmental needs but also share these with her parents (Session 7, 5 January 2022). She was becoming aware of obstacles that were limiting her educational outcomes and had started to access CAMHS support. Moreover, this process corresponded with Jess, Paul and Leoni developing self-confidence (Q4) that enabled them to attend a meeting with PRU teachers and articulate Leoni’s needs such that her curriculum was adapted to address these (Stage 5). Each participant also stated in the questionnaire that they were now developing clear education goals. Conscientisation and the development of Leoni’s self-narrative here became a collaborative process of mutual engagement – an emerging, collective project, thus reducing Leoni’s ontological anxieties and enabling her to act on hers and her parents’ future-orientated goals.

Leoni’s social and academic development remains a process that sees frequent setbacks but conscientisation is a process managed within the contours of relationships within which the self-narrative is negotiated and maintained. It is fluid, emergent and reliant on the ongoing discourses from within which one’s narrative emerges. Conscientisation emerges within the conditions of disadvantage and at the confluence points at which these conditions are discursively constructed (politically or otherwise). Thus, creating the possibility of renegotiating the conditions that frame realities and define and orientate students’ self-narratives. In practice this case study demonstrates the impact of relational processes and encounters with Leoni and her parents such that they evidenced the development of skills and confidence to access resources needed to realise Leoni’s developmental and educational goals and negotiate pathways to achieve these with her parents at points of resistance in her social world and in the PRU.

Conclusions

This process has been replicated with each of the 15 students and their families who have participated in this project and, although not demonstrating all the activities, setbacks or participants’ experiences, it does illustrate the role that educational relational encounters with mentors can play within the home in order to help re-establish student fractured narratives and influence the systems that can restrict these processes and place them at disadvantage.

The processes are not presented as a panacea, though they serve to demonstrate an approach that recognises one’s narrative as distinct yet holistically valued. Moreover, the findings add to a growing international field of research (for example, see Relationship-Centred Education Network, 2023) that asserts the role of mentoring approaches that act *with* rather than *on* students in order to transform their situation and start to create new opportunities for students’ academic and social development through negotiating at points of resistance. Moreover, this process extends current mentoring approaches to support an emergent conscientisation that recognises the intersections of political, physical (non-human), socio-cultural, gender, race, sex, disability and place-space factors that impact and orientate the developmental and education trajectories of students.

Critically, the mentoring processes and image metaphors discussed in this article demonstrate that responsibility for self-determination cannot be disassociated from the responsibilities of other participants associated with maintaining the self-project from which one is indivisible yet distinct. This includes educators.

Hence, for practitioners the participatory processes of this mentoring project extend youth work principles to align mentors as social pedagogues; a holistic model of working with students and their families that might be employed within schools where the focus of the mentoring outcomes remains with the student. Thus, perhaps embracing Buber’s (1950, cited in Friedman, 2002) assertion that ‘Human truth is participation in being’ (p. 189).

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the following standards.

- *Code of Human Research Ethics* (2010), published by the British Psychological Society
- University of Portsmouth Ethics Policy (2017)
- *The Concordat to Support Research Integrity* (2012), published by Universities UK
- UKRIO Code of Practice for Research: Promoting good practice and preventing misconduct (2009)

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication (all data anonymised).

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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