



Distal and experiential perspectives of relationship quality from mentors, mentees, and program staff in a school-based youth mentoring program

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Youth mentoring
Relationship quality
Program staff
School-based mentoring

ABSTRACT

Although youth mentoring pairs are often surrounded by external parties who observe and interact with the dyads on a regular basis, these parties are rarely used as informants regarding the quality of the mentoring relationships; rather, assessments are usually based on mentor or mentee self-reports. This study gathered reports of relationship quality from nine mentor-mentee dyads in a New Zealand school-based mentoring program, as well as reports from the program staff who supervised them. Using a descriptive case study approach that combined multiple methods, this study found that while program staff perceptions of relationship quality converged with mentor and mentee survey results for the most part, there was also divergence across perspectives. The findings suggest that program staff can be a valuable source of information on mentoring relationships, and that obtaining multiple perspectives of relationship quality provides a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of youth mentoring relationships.

1. Introduction

Formal youth mentoring programs pair non-familial adults with young people to promote youth well-being and success (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Evidence shows youth mentoring bears small but consistent effects, and points to mentoring relationship quality as a key mechanism of change (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Mentees in quality relationships appear to see greater benefits than mentees who are not (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). With this in mind, assessing relationship quality is critical to gathering the best evidence possible for understanding, and subsequently promoting, quality relationships.

Most assessments of relationship quality rely on self-reports from mentors and mentees. However, there have been calls to gather assessments from external parties who have knowledge of the mentoring pairs, such as family members, teachers, case workers, or program staff (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009) because such informants often have direct contact with, and observation of, mentoring dyads. Program staff, in particular, provide valuable information about relationship quality by drawing on their experience of monitoring the evolution of dyadic relationship development over time and across a range of different relationships. However, it is unknown how their perceptions of relationship quality align with those of mentors and mentees in the relationship and what their insights could offer beyond the observations of those within the relationship.

To explore the perceptions of relationship quality from external parties, we conducted a descriptive case study focusing on a cohort of mentoring dyads and the program staff they interacted with. This article aims to ascertain whether program staff assessments of relationship quality converge with or diverge from reports from mentors and mentees and whether the information obtained from staff offers different insights to those expressed by mentors and mentees. In doing so, we argue that program staff are a useful source of information regarding mentoring relationship quality which should be used more often by researchers.

2. Background

The essential premise of youth mentoring is that relationships are transformative, and thus bringing caring adults and vulnerable youth together to establish a relationship can produce real benefits to mentees. Although models of mentoring (Keller, 2005; Larose & Tarabulsky, 2005; Rhodes, 2002) vary in articulating what the mentoring relationship actually does, they all theorize the mentor-mentee relationship as a critical part of the mentoring process. However, simply being in a mentoring relationship is not sufficient to bring about mentee change (Goldner & Scharf, 2014; Li & Julian, 2012). There are factors at work which make some relationships highly effective, and others less so. Relationship quality has been touted as a difference-maker in mentoring relationships (Nakkula & Harris, 2014) as evidence suggests

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that high quality relationships are more likely to result in improved outcomes for youth (Bayer, Grossman, & DuBois, 2015; Chan et al., 2013; Goldner & Maysseless, 2009; Zand et al., 2009).

Due to the relational nature of youth mentoring, relationship quality is often conceptualized and measured using constructs that tap into the bond between mentor and mentee, such as closeness (Bayer et al., 2015), dependency (Goldner & Maysseless, 2009), relationship satisfaction (Leyton-Armakan, Lawrence, Deutsch, Williams, & Henneberger, 2012), warmth and trust (Farruggia, Bullen, & Pierson, 2013). Quality youth mentoring relationships have also been associated with developmental relationships (Li & Julian, 2012; Morrow & Styles, 1995). Such relationships are characterized by an emotional attachment between mentor and mentee, a youth-centered approach which prioritizes the mentee's needs and interests, and a balance of power within the dyad. Conversely, prescriptive mentoring relationships tend to be driven by mentor-defined goals, with mentors having limited interest in the interpersonal aspect of mentoring and bypassing the need to establish a connection with mentees in the early stages of the relationship (Morrow & Styles, 1995).

Studies of mentoring relationship quality have largely relied on mentor and mentee self-report data. A number of researchers advocate for the inclusion of both mentor and mentee perspectives (Herrera, Sipe, McClanahan, Arbreton, & Pepper, 2000; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005; Zand et al., 2009) to better understand the relationship and ascertain whether mentor and mentee reports of relationship quality converge (Thomson & Zand, 2010; Varga & Deutsch, 2016). Mentors and mentees can experience their relationships differently, with one party believing they had a strong relationship while the other did not. Studies have reported divergent reports of relationship quality stemming from mentees rating relationships more highly than mentors (Rhodes, Schwartz, Willis, & Wu, 2014), and vice versa (Varga & Deutsch, 2016).

Amid the preponderance of mentor and mentee self-report data, there have also been recommendations to collect reports of relationship quality from external parties, such as family or program staff (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Varga & Deutsch, 2016). Theoretical models such as Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Keller's systemic model of mentoring (Keller, 2005; Keller & Blakeslee, 2014) conceptualize youth development as occurring within a dynamic social environment in which they influence and are influenced by others. Supporting young people therefore requires an understanding of their social environment and the myriad of interconnections between people located in the environment. Accordingly, youth mentoring research has increasingly considered the interdependence between dyads and the social environment in which they are located, acknowledging the intricate relationships between mentors, mentees, and other people connected to the relationship, such as family, teachers, case workers, program staff, and peers (Keller, 2005). However, research on the interconnections between youth mentoring dyads and their environment has largely focused on how parents or families (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011), peers (Pryce et al., 2015), and teachers (Lakind, Atkins, & Eddy, 2015) affect the mentoring relationship. In contrast, youth mentoring scholarship has paid little attention to how people in the environment surrounding the dyad perceive the mentoring relationship.

Elsewhere in youth development literature, researchers have recognized the value of investigating “near and distant” frames to better understand complex phenomena involving youth (Bottrell & Armstrong, 2007; Sanders, Munford, & Boden, 2017). “Distant frames”, according to Sanders et al. (2017, p. 763), take into account the broader socio-structural and cultural influences on youth, without which the “near frames” that capture individualized perspectives offer only part of the picture. Adapting the concept of Bottrell and Armstrong's (2007) and Sanders et al.'s (2017) near and distant frames of investigation of youth experiences, we argue that youth mentoring research would benefit from soliciting a combination of “distal vs. experiential”

perspectives of mentoring relationship quality. The distal perspective captures the view from those within the broader context who are looking onto the relationship, and the experiential perspective captures the view of those within the relationship. Mentoring research demonstrates that we do not always see what others see of the same relationship — a limitation of using self-reports from single dyad members as highlighted by discrepant mentor and mentee perceptions of relationship quality found in research described earlier (e.g., Rhodes et al., 2014). Through their ongoing monitoring of the evolution of a range of mentoring relationships, program staff can offer a valuable distal perspective of relationship quality. From their bird's eye view, program staff likely observe different relational characteristics to those who are experiencing the relationship from within. We argue that obtaining a richer understanding of the complexity of mentoring relationship quality through both distal and experiential perspectives will deepen understanding of the relational characteristics that are important for mentee development.

Pryce and Keller (2013) offer one example of a study that combines direct observation of pairs by researchers (the distal perspective) with mentor and mentee interviews (the experiential perspective). Their research has produced important findings on how mentor communication styles influence relationship quality (Pryce, 2012; Pryce & Keller, 2013). However, direct observation research is time and resource intensive, and often only provides a snapshot of relationship quality at a particular point in time. To build a larger evidence base of distal and experiential relationship perspectives, researchers also need strategies to capture distal perspectives in a more feasible way, particularly in the resource-strapped environments that characterize youth program delivery (Arnold & Cater, 2011). In addition to issues of time and resourcing, the tendency to focus primarily on mentor and mentee self-reports may be partially attributed to the long-time dominance of community-based mentoring (CBM) programs. Collecting meaningful assessments from CBM program staff may be challenging, as they have little direct interaction and observation of mentoring pairs (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). However, as more structured forms of mentoring, such as school-based mentoring (SBM), continue to grow in popularity, opportunities to gather data from program staff with substantive direct contact with dyads increase. These opportunities may include gathering data from distal individuals who have a view of all the dyadic relationships that make up a youth mentoring program and of their development over time, enabling a more nuanced understanding of relationship quality within the same program context.

3. The current study

The current study was undertaken within the context of a SBM program located in Auckland, New Zealand. This program targets youth who are approaching a critical juncture in their education and have been identified by their teachers as being at risk of underachievement as they transition from middle school to high school. Mentees are paired with undergraduate students completing an internship of one academic year (approximately 50 h) as a mentor in a service learning course at The University of Auckland. Mentors are seen as an important resource for mitigating negative outcomes associated with the risk faced by these youth by helping them prepare for a time of significant change. Research has shown the value of additional programmatic support, such as mentoring, during times of educational transition (Sawhill & Karpilow, 2014). Mentors and mentees are paired, but meet in the same space as other mentor-mentee dyads, with whom they are encouraged to interact. Pairs meet for 2 h a week, for one academic year, from late March to mid-November. The current study focused on one site, where the program has been operating since 2008.

This article concentrates on one research question: Do program staff assessments of mentoring relationship quality converge with or diverge from mentor and mentee self-reported ratings? The study was designed as a case study that draws on qualitative and quantitative data to

produce descriptive rankings of relationship quality. Using a case study approach allowed the researchers to take advantage of the cohort structure of the mentoring program. Case study prioritizes depth and detail, as well as emphasizing the context of the case (Flyvbjerg, 2011), thus providing optimal insight with a small sample size. Case study also delineates a clear boundary of the case (Flyvbjerg, 2011), and the cohort nature of the program enabled relative rankings of quality across a range of relationships within the case. Mentors and mentees independently completed standardized assessments of the quality of their mentoring relationships and these ratings were compared to relationship quality ratings assigned to each dyad by program staff. A focus group with program staff members about their rating decisions, as well as an analysis of mentor portfolios created by each mentor as an artefact of their relationship, provided deeper insights into the justifications behind their relationship quality assessments.

This article is the second part of a study on relationship quality in a New Zealand youth mentoring program. After exploring the features of quality mentoring relationships and how mentor characteristics influence relationship quality from the perspective of program staff (Dutton et al., 2017), this article brings together multiple informants – staff, mentors, and mentees – to examine the degree of alignment between these perspectives. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, and all participants provided informed consent.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

Data was collected from two groups of participants. First, two program staff members who observed and interacted with the mentoring dyads over the duration of the program participated in the focus group component of the research. They were identified as potential participants because they were the only two program staff members who interacted with the dyads, and thus had the most substantive knowledge of their relationships from a distal perspective. One was male and the other female. One staff member was the onsite supervisor for all mentoring sessions for the duration of the program, facilitating every session, and providing support and guidance for all pairs as needed. The other was a mentor supervisor who met with mentors as a group on a weekly basis, and conducted mid-program interviews with each mentor to discuss their progress and address any issues they were having. This staff member also visited dyads on-site approximately every five weeks to observe and interact with mentors and mentees.

Second, mentor-mentee pairs were invited to participate. The mentoring program cohort included 26 mentor-mentee pairs. Of the 26, nine dyads provided the necessary consent and assent required to complete a relationship quality questionnaire and provide the researchers with access to their mentoring relationship portfolio. All mentors were female undergraduate students (only one of the 26 mentors in this cohort was male). Their mentees were in their final year of middle school (approximately 12 years of age) preparing to move to high school. The participating mentees were five females and four males.

All 26 mentoring relationships in this cohort remained intact for the expected duration of the program but attendance data could not be obtained to enable the comparative dosage of mentoring received by participating and non-participating mentees. During the focus group, program staff were asked whether they thought the relationship quality of the participating pairs were representative of the larger cohort. After conferring amongst themselves, they agreed the relationships discussed were reflective of the relationship quality for the whole group.

Data regarding participant ethnicity was not collected at an individual level as the cohort of mentors and mentees targeted in this research was small, and there were concerns such detail could jeopardize the confidentiality of participants. Historically, most mentors

have been New Zealand European/Pākehā but the program also attracts increasing numbers of Asian mentors who were either raised in New Zealand, or are international students who have come to New Zealand specifically for tertiary study. As the school is located in a diverse urban area of South Auckland, many mentees are typically from Māori, Pacific Island, or other minority backgrounds.

4.2. Procedures and measures

Three data sources were used in this study, capturing both experiential and distal perspectives of relationship quality. Program staff represented the distal perspective via a focus group, while survey data from mentors and mentees and mentor portfolios reflected the experiential perspective. Due to several constraints (e.g., participant access outside of program delivery), quantitative survey data was used to gather experiential relationship quality information, rather than interviews or another in-depth qualitative methodology which would make the experiential perspective more comparable to that obtained from program staff (see Section 6.1 for more detail).

4.2.1. Program staff focus group

The participating program staff were invited to take part in a semi-structured, 1.5 h focus group about their observations of, and experiences with, these mentoring dyads. At the start of the focus group, the staff members were asked to independently complete a relationship quality categorization exercise. Program staff were given nine cards, each with the names of a mentor-mentee pair, and were instructed to group the cards into three categories: high, good, and low quality relationships. They were not provided any guidance (such as a rubric) about what constitutes high, good, and low-quality relationships as part of the study was aimed at drawing out how staff make these distinctions (Dutton et al., 2017). Program staff were not required to distribute the pairs evenly amongst categories. These ratings were recorded and used to guide the focus group discussion.

After they completed the exercise, participants were reunited for a discussion. Participants were systematically asked about each mentoring pair and to provide justifications for their ratings. They were also asked to address any discrepancies (for example, why a pair rated as high quality by one staff member was rated low by the other).

The approach undertaken to enable the two staff members to first independently rank order the quality of the dyads without influence of the other's opinion and then to engage in a joint discussion about their ratings, offered dual benefits of obtaining unbiased initial assessments and co-constructed revised assessments that took into consideration details not considered by either staff member alone. This also had the advantage of deepening the staff members' own reflective learning about their role in monitoring mentor-mentee relationship quality.

4.2.2. Mentor and mentee surveys

Mentors and mentees independently completed a mentoring relationship quality survey during a mentoring session. Mentees were accompanied to a quiet space where the researcher explained the survey. As some of the mentees had limited literacy and/or English was not their first language, they were offered the option of completing the survey with the researcher reading the questions with them, or they could read the questions themselves and ask questions as they arose. All mentees elected to complete the survey independently. Mentors were free to choose a quiet space away from their mentee to complete the survey. The mentor and mentee surveys were adapted versions of the Match Characteristics Questionnaire (MCQ; Harris & Nakkula, 2003a) and Youth Mentoring Survey (YMS; Harris & Nakkula, 2003b), a complementary set of scales designed to be used together to assess mentoring relationship quality. The MCQ is a 71-item scale that asks mentors about the mentoring relationship across three sections: how they feel about their relationship (e.g., "My mentee is open with me"); the mentor's focus in the relationship (e.g., "focusing on feelings and

emotional things with your mentee”); and the nature of the relationship (e.g., “My mentee needs more from me than I can give”). Items are assessed on a 6-point scale, from 1 = *never* to 6 = *always*. The YMS is a 50-item scale that asks mentees about their relationship in two sections. Like the MCQ, the first section asks mentees how their relationship feels (e.g., “My mentor and I like to talk about the same things”), while section two asks what mentees do with their mentor (e.g., “talk about how you are doing at school”).

Permission was obtained from the first author of the MCQ and YMS to make two modifications. Firstly, the MCQ and YMS are both extensive surveys which cover a wide range of aspects of mentoring relationships. Although these surveys were considered to be the best fit for the purposes for this research, there were also pragmatic concerns the surveys may be burdensome for both mentees and mentors, particularly as the surveys had to be administered in a short timeframe at a busy time of year for the program and the school. With this in mind, the decision was made to administer only the first section of the survey, which focuses on how they feel about their mentoring relationship. Therefore, this study included 22 of 71 questions from the original MCQ, and 25 of 50 YMS questions.

Although only one section of each survey was administered, multiple subscales measuring elements of the relationship were included. For the MCQ, 5 subscales were used: closeness (e.g., “I can trust what my mentee tells me”), discomfort (e.g., “I feel distant from my mentee”), satisfaction (e.g., “I feel like the mentoring relationship is getting stronger”), non-academic support seeking (e.g., “My mentee makes me aware of his/her problems or concerns”), and academic support seeking (e.g., “My mentee seems to want my help with his/her academics”). For the YMS, 3 subscales were used: relational (e.g., “My mentor makes me happy”), instrumental (e.g., “My mentor has helped me with problems in my life”), and prescription (e.g., “My mentor focuses too much on school”).

The second modification was an adjustment to the scale for the YMS. The original survey uses a 4-point scale, with answer options ‘Not at all true’, ‘A little true’, ‘Pretty true’, and ‘Very true’. However, to address an expected positive skew in mentee responses (Farruggia & Bullen, 2010) and increase the degree of variance across individuals, the first survey author agreed to include an additional ‘Always true’ option. The scale for the MCQ was not altered.

4.2.3. Mentor portfolios

Mentors were required by the program to keep a portfolio throughout the year as an artefact of their mentoring relationship, including activities they did with their mentee, mentee academic information, and personal mentor reflections. Although mentors were ultimately responsible for the portfolios, they were free to develop the portfolio together with their mentee. Some information was standardized across portfolios, such as mentor and mentee introduction sheets; teacher checklists outlining where mentor academic support would be most valuable; lists of recent performances on standardized tests; and several ice breaker activities provided by the program. Other portfolio content varied widely, but typically included activities (e.g., creative writing; goal-setting activities and outcomes; activities about mentee’s cultural background and language; timelines of important events in the mentees lives); mentor reflections (e.g., mentor comments on each activity, and how useful and fun it was; mentor ‘diary’ of what they did and felt in each session; periodic notes about specific events or activities); and, less often, personal mentee contributions (e.g., how mentees felt about their mentor and mentoring).

The first author was granted access to the portfolios at the end of the mentoring program, which were subsequently scanned as password-protected PDF documents for analysis. The personal reflections and notes mentors kept in their portfolios were included in the analysis. Mentee permission to use portfolios was required as they included personal mentee information.

4.3. Analysis

Analysis was conducted across three phases. The process started with establishing the categories of relationship quality, and sorting the program staff ratings and mentor and mentee surveys accordingly. Then, patterns of convergence and divergence were identified for each dyad. The final phase of analysis used qualitative data from the portfolios and staff interview to provide further insight into the ratings at the dyadic level (i.e., for each pair) and across pairs within a converging or diverging group.

4.3.1. Relationship quality categorization

Ratings of relationship quality began with the categories assigned to each pair by program staff during the focus group. While the program staff were originally directed to sort dyads into high, good, or low-quality categories, a fourth ranking category emerged from the focus group. During a review at the end of the focus group, the program staff agreed that two pairs should be differentiated from those who they rated as high quality, and would be more accurately described as being of exceptional quality. The additional category was immediately discussed by all authors, who then agreed to proceed with the inclusion of a fourth category of ‘exceptional’ in the analysis.

Following the focus group, mentor and mentee survey responses were entered into and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Negatively-valenced questions were reverse-scored. Then scores across items were summed, adding up the numerical value of the response for each item (i.e., lowest response on the scale = 1, second lowest response = 2, and so on). For mentees, the maximum possible summed score was 125 (25 questions on a 5-point scale), and for mentors it was 132 (22 questions on a 6-point scale). The authors decided to use the summed survey score for analysis. As a descriptive case study with a small sample size, there appeared to be limited usefulness in, and statistical power for, analyzing responses at the subscale level given rankings were based on holistic assessments of relationship quality.

In response to the emergence of a fourth category in the program staff focus group, the mean and standard deviation of survey responses were calculated for mentees ($M = 92.00, SD = 19.03$) and mentors ($M = 96.78, SD = 17.41$), and used to group the dyads into four categories of relationship quality. Similar to Futch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson, and Varga (2016), summed scores higher than one standard deviation above the mean were categorized as ‘exceptional’; those from the mean to one standard deviation above the mean were identified as ‘high’; those from the mean to one standard deviation below the mean were defined as ‘good’; and summed scores one standard deviation below the mean and lower were considered ‘low’ (see Table 1).

The category labels were then reviewed by all three authors. The tension of using the label of “good” quality to describe a group of relationships statistically below the mean was identified and explored. Translation of the total scores for those surveys that fell in the “good” category to their reflective response options on the Likert scale demonstrated a pattern of responses equivalent to “pretty true” (response option 3 of 5). For the two “good” mentor surveys, responses fell on either side of “pretty often” (response option 4 of 6). With this in mind, “good” was deemed a more appropriate label than “average”.

Table 1
Survey scores required for relationship quality category.

Relationship quality category	Summed survey score	
	Mentees	Mentors
Exceptional	111 and higher	114 and higher
High	92–110	97–113
Good	73–91	79–96
Low	72 and under	78 and under

Table 2
Relationship quality rating for all participants.

Cluster/pair ID	Participant relationship quality rating			
	Prog. Staff 1	Prog. Staff 2	Mentee	Mentor
Positive convergence				
3	Exceptional	Exceptional	High	High
6	Good	High	Good	High
19	Exceptional	Exceptional	Exceptional	Exceptional
22	Good	Good	High	High
Negative convergence				
5	Low	Good	Low	Good
16	Low	Low	Low	Good
Divergence				
2	High	Good	High	Low
14	High	Low	High	High
15	Good	Good	High	Low

4.3.2. Identifying convergence/divergence

Once relationship quality rankings were applied to each mentor and mentee using the guidelines described in Table 1, patterns of convergence or divergence were identified across all four respondents. Dyads were allocated to one of three patterns: positive convergence, negative convergence, and divergence (see Table 2). For converging dyads, pairs that did not have any low ratings were categorized as exhibiting positive convergence, while those that received a low rating were categorized as exhibiting negative convergence. Dyads were categorized as divergent if at least one rating was two categories lower than another (e.g., there were both high and low ratings). This ensured that analysis of divergent pairs focused on dyads with extreme differences.

4.3.3. Analyzing and synthesizing qualitative evidence

Guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), a deductive thematic analysis was conducted with the staff focus group and mentor portfolios, focused on contextual evidence that explained why the patterns of convergence or divergence occurred in each relationship. The focus group transcription was closely read twice, highlighting comments from program staff about why they categorized pairs as they did. The same process was used for the mentor portfolios, identifying key mentor and mentee comments that clarified their survey responses, as well as information that supported or challenged the program staff member's categorizations. These data were then synthesized by the first author and discussed at length with the second and third authors. The full process of re-reading and analyzing the focus group transcription and portfolios was repeated once more by the first author, followed by a further discussion amongst all authors to reflect on and refine the analysis, before a final check for consistency and clarity.

5. Results

Table 2 presents the clusters of dyads, as well as the ratings from program staff (from the categorization activity in the focus group) and mentors and mentees (based on survey responses using the rating categories from Table 1). Six dyads were identified as convergent: four positively and two negatively. Three dyads fit the divergent pattern. This section explores the ratings with respect to the contextual information from the qualitative data sources. Dyads with positive convergence are presented first, followed by negatively converging pairs, and then divergent pairs.

5.1. Positive convergence

Four pairs met the criteria of positive convergence, indicating general agreement amongst program staff and the dyad that the relationship demonstrated many positive qualities. Of these four, two

were rated as high-exceptional (Pairs 3 and 19), while the other two were rated as good-high (Pair 6 and 22). Pair 19 was the highest quality relationship according to these ratings, receiving four exceptional ratings. The program staff were unanimous in their praise of this relationship. Mentor and mentee survey scores were very high (mentee scored 112 out of 125, and the mentor 126 out of 132), representing satisfaction and a high quality relationship. However, with the exception of Pair 19, which was the only dyad that received the same rating across all four perspectives, there were some slight differences in opinion regarding the quality of the relationships which are explored in more detail.

Pair 3 was noted by program staff as an exemplary mentoring relationship. In discussing their assessment of Pair 3, program staff noted that when compared to Pair 19, this relationship was more at risk of failure. Specifically, the mentee in Pair 3 had more complex needs than the mentee in Pair 19, and program staff said that without a mentor of high standard, the relationship could have struggled. Additionally, staff suggested the mentee in Pair 19 had a personal disposition which made mentoring slightly easier.

Both the mentor and mentee survey responses for Pair 3 translated to high ratings, albeit lower than those from the program staff. In her reflections, the mentor often wrote with fondness about her mentee, describing them as cheeky, beautifully spoken, amazing, and stating once, “[mentee] always seems to surprise me”. The portfolio for this pair was strongly focused on goal-setting, suggesting an instrumental partnership where the mentor supported and encouraged her mentee to develop academically. Yet, other examples from the mentor's portfolio reflections showed the sessions were prescriptive at times, and the mentee was not happy about this. For one session the mentor wrote “Decided to work on creative writing, which [mentee] wasn't pleased with”. In another example, the mentor had a book she wanted the mentee to read because it was above their reading level and she felt they were ready for a challenge. The mentee protested but read at the mentor's insistence. Interestingly, the mentee was instantly taken by the story, and “identified with the main character and insisted on taking the book home to read over the weekend”. This example shows there was a degree of prescription in the mentor's approach which the mentee resisted, although it appeared to be what they needed. This tension may have contributed to the differing relationship categorizations from distal and experiential perspectives. From the experiential perspective of mentor and mentee, such tensions may have contributed to the slightly lower (although still high) ratings, while program staff saw this instance and others like it as evidence the mentor was meeting their mentee's needs.

Pair 6 sat on the cusp of good and high ratings. One program staff member and the mentee rated it as a good quality relationship, while the other staff member and the mentor gave high scores, suggesting genuine satisfaction with the quality of this relationship. One program staff member commented on how during an informal discussion towards the end of the year, the mentee was “surprisingly forthcoming in praise of [mentor]”. Program staff emphasized how this relationship was not as good as those of Pairs 3 and 19 in their view, stating “it was a positive relationship but for different kinds of reasons ... it was as good as it could be”. They described moments of struggle as the mentee took some time to open up to the mentor, and how the mentor dealt with this in a positive, patient way. For the program staff, these mentor qualities were “the foundation of why their relationship became as good as it did”, and the positive survey responses show the mentor and mentee are aligned with staff members.

Amongst those pairs who met the criteria of positive convergence, Pair 22 was the only dyad where mentor and mentee rated the relationship higher than program staff. The ratings from program staff were both good, accompanied by positive discussion of this relationship in the staff focus group. Despite observing closeness and purposefulness in the relationship, the staff members had genuine concern over whether this relationship was able to flourish given the mentor's lack of

English language skills. Both the mentor and mentee's survey responses fell in the high quality category. It seems the reservations program staff had about communication issues affecting the relationship were either not an issue for mentor and mentee, or were managed well enough that it had little, if any, impact on their relationship ratings.

One difference between Pair 22 and the other dyads that converged positively was that the mentor's portfolio had a substantial amount of mentor reflection. This information provided support for the mentor and mentee's high quality ratings, and paints a warmer, more optimistic picture of the relationship than program staff did. A unique feature of this portfolio is that late in the relationship, the mentor and mentee had written short notes about how they felt about their relationship. Having the mentee's thoughts are particularly insightful, as she wrote:

When I met [mentor] she help me learn my timetable and she laugh all the time and she had fun and I wish we can spend more time together and she is amazing to me, like a sister to me. She is my favourite and she was laughing all the time... I love you [mentor] and she give me thing that I love and she is awesome and beautiful and pretty and she is wonderful and she is a problem solver.

This comment showcases a mentee who has experienced a warm and satisfying mentoring relationship. Meanwhile, the mentor's own reflections on each session were characterized by a sense of care and enjoyment which matched that expressed by her mentee.

The converging positively group presents four dyads for whom mentoring has clearly been a positive experience. These ratings are a positive sign of quality relationships being recognized by all participants, with the multiple perspectives providing layers of understanding of the quality of these dyads.

5.2. Negative convergence

Two pairs met the criteria of negative convergence. These two relationships were not only rated low by at least one of the program staff, but the mentee survey responses were the lowest of the group, scoring 60 and 64 out of a possible 125. They were the only two scores to fall more than one standard deviation below the mean. There was also a significant gap between the scores of these two mentees and the next lowest mentee survey score, which was 83. This suggests these two mentees experienced a lower level of relationship quality unlike the other mentees.

The scores for Pair 5 negatively converged, with two low ratings and two good ratings. One staff member cited numerous concerns about the prescriptive approach taken by the mentor, little engagement from the mentee, and an overall lack of closeness and purpose to the relationship as reasons for a low quality rating. The other staff member had similar concerns, although they rated them as a good quality relationship. The mentor rating indicates the experience for the mentor was average (90/132). However, the mentee had the lowest score in the group (60/125). Analysis of the mentor's portfolio to account for the dissatisfaction of the mentee and, to a lesser extent, the mentor, provided little contextual evidence. There seemed to be an effort on behalf of the mentor to try and address numerous academic and social mentee needs, with little success.

Pair 16 had the lowest quality relationship overall. Both program staff rated it as low and in the accompanying focus group discussion, acknowledged Pair 16 as the relationship with the "most challenging circumstances". The mentee had high needs and a personal disposition which was difficult for the mentor to work with. Despite praising the mentor for her resilience and hard work, the consensus was that the mentor did not have the requisite skills to work effectively with her mentee. The mentee's survey score was categorized as low, while the mentor's responses were slightly more positive, falling in the good category.

The mentor reflections in her portfolio offer some context for the low ratings from program staff and the mentee. There is an ongoing

tone of disharmony; it seems the mentor struggled to engage with her mentee in any purposeful or fun way. When describing how her mentee would react to activities, typical comments included how the mentee "found it boring", "talked about how to make it more interesting", and "didn't really want to work". In another instance, the mentee upset the mentor and the mentor wrote "sad about how I was treated – did she appreciate my work... wanted her to do work because I care. Didn't do what she promised". The tone of the entry was of insecurity and frustration, reflecting the mentor's struggle to connect with her mentee. The following week, she asked the mentee to do a Q&A, with questions such as "how do you think about our relationship?" and "what do you think [about] our progress towards our goals?" The mentee barely responds, with most answers simply consisting of a smiley face. This raises questions about how mentors deal with conflict in relationships. In this example, the mentor is offering an opportunity to communicate but whether it was appropriate, or even whether an expectation of mentee honesty is realistic given the state of their relationship, is unclear.

In another example, the mentor had to move their mentoring sessions to a different day of the week midway through the program. Upon hearing this news, the mentee "cried and didn't talk to me for the last 15-20 minutes [of the session]. It made me feel bad about changing". Later in the portfolio, there are notes from the mentee, one of which concerns this incident. It says:

I have to be strong with the change to Tuesdays. It might be interesting being on a Tuesday. I feel like that on Tuesdays I will feel like there will be no-one to play and I will miss [other mentors]. I will also miss all the fun time we will have with them.

The mentee is distressed, and whether the dyad was able to come to a shared understanding about the need to change is unknown. As noted by program staff, there were clearly some serious issues in this relationship.

5.3. Divergence

The remaining three dyads were classified as divergent. Two pairs, 2 and 15, had a similar pattern of reporting: the relationship incurred three different ratings (high, good, and low), with the mentee rating high and the mentor rating low. Pair 14 met the criteria of divergence based solely on a low rating from one staff member. The staff focus group and mentor portfolios were particularly useful for understanding why different parties felt differently about the relationship, illuminating how the experience of mentoring can be variable within relationships.

For Pair 2, there was neither consensus between the program staff, nor between the mentor and mentee, with three different ratings reported. This was a complex relationship which elicited more discussion than any other dyad during the staff focus group. This mentor was singled out for exhibiting anxiety in her relationship; program staff noted she "anguished and worried ... like, is this working? And it was working really well". Having a mentee who was "particularly quiet ... who spoke little and showed little" led to mentor uncertainty and anxiety about her relationship. Consequently, Mentor 2 reported one of the lowest scores of the nine mentors in this research (75/132). Her mentee, on the other hand, reported one of the highest mentee scores (104/125), suggesting the mentee had a positive perception of their relationship.

The mentor portfolio offers no support of the mentor's low survey score. In fact, the tone throughout the portfolio is one of fondness and enjoyment in the relationship, of a mentor who is responsive to her mentee, and of a partnership between two fully committed and engaged people. Considering the mentor portfolio contains multiple examples of how attuned she was to her mentee, it is striking Mentor 2 demonstrated insecurity about her relationship when there seems to be ample evidence of mentee engagement and happiness in the relationship.

Program staff praised Mentor 2 for seeking advice, and for

persevering despite being personally unsatisfied with the relationship. One staff member initially spoke about the value of the relationship to the mentee; how they observed subtle mentee cues of care for their mentor and the benefits gained as a result from mentoring. This staff member was also mindful of the challenges of working with mentees who give little verbal or non-verbal feedback on the relationship, and felt the mentor did well under trying circumstances, rating their relationship high as a result. The other staff member had significant concerns about the mentor's anxiety which influenced their rating of the relationship as good, rather than high. After a long discussion, program staff agreed the mentee gained from the relationship and that there was a close emotional bond.

The scores of Pair 15 largely reflect a good quality relationship. Both staff members rated it as good, and the mentee indicated their satisfaction with a score reflecting high relationship quality. However, the mentor gave the lowest score of all the mentors (74/132), indicating her experience was of a lower quality relationship. The mentor's portfolio contains nothing of a personal or reflective nature which could help provide context to her low score. There were two comments from program staff which hint at the mentor's attitude towards being a mentor. One staff member noted mentoring appeared to be "just something she was doing and she was happy and good at it, but I don't know that she kinda really pushed herself". The staff member then followed this comment up by saying the mentor was "able and is a good mature young person, but it was kind of like she was skipping along". These comments may be an indication the mentor was not personally invested in the relationship.

Program staff were divided in their assessment of Pair 14. One rated it high, while the other had reservations about the quality of the relationship and rated it low. The subsequent discussion revealed the staff member who rated it high was focused on the early phases of this relationship, when the mentor exhibited considerable creativity and purpose. However, program staff agreed the relationship lost steam over time. It was this downward trend which influenced the other staff member to give it a low quality rating.

For the mentor and mentee however, the mentoring relationship was satisfying. Their survey responses were very positive, indicating each experienced a high quality relationship. The mentor portfolio also lends support to the mentor and mentee's high scores. For example, the goals set for the mentoring relationship were well-rounded, mentee-driven and reflected a holistic view of the mentee's wellbeing. There were also multiple efforts to incorporate the mentee's cultural knowledge into sessions, such as learning greetings in the mentee's first language and developing speaking exercises based on stories from the mentee's Pacific Island culture. As a result, the portfolio reinforces the mentor and mentee's reports of a satisfying relationship, rather than the divergent perceptions of one program staff member.

6. Discussion

The aim of this article was to determine whether program staff assessments of relationship quality converge or diverge with mentor and mentee self-reports and, in doing so, to ascertain if those looking on to the relationship from a distal perspective (in the case of program staff) perceive different aspects of relationship quality than those within the relationship (mentors and mentees) who reflect on quality from an experiential perspective. For six of the nine pairs included in this research, the distal and experiential perspectives of mentoring relationship quality largely converged, although the degree and nature of convergence varied. The degree of convergence is a positive sign, as it indicates the multiple informants were noticing when relationships were going very well and when they were not going well, at least at a global level.

This general level of attunement by program staff to how relationships are experienced is important for mentoring program effectiveness because it enables staff to act on signals that intervention and further

support is needed. Program staff in this research also revealed how they do respond to these signals, guiding and supporting some of the mentors and, in this way, purposefully influence the quality of those relationships. The critical role of program staff in influencing mentors and mentoring relationships is supported by Keller's (2015) recent work but this evidence base is nascent. The current research amplifies the need for evidence regarding how program staff assess relationship quality because they are not merely passive observers of youth mentoring pairs, but active influencers on these relationships.

Notably, the assessments of mentoring relationship quality presented here demonstrate the unique position occupied by program staff as even when assessments converged, the focus from a distal perspective was different from the experiential. When discussing the pairs who were subsequently classified as divergent, program staff also spoke about various issues which could explain the contradictory reports. Informed by their knowledge and experience working with a range of mentors and mentees, program staff drew on a broader, more contextualized understanding of the kinds of characteristics and practices that contribute to relationship quality. Their focus also revealed an underlying assumption that the primary focus of the program is to work in service of the mentees. Explanatory accounts of staff ratings illustrated how staff honed in on the role of mentor characteristics and skills in influencing relationship quality. Although they acknowledged the dyadic nature of these interactions, commenting that some mentees were very challenging (e.g., Mentee 3) or easier to work with (e.g., Mentee 19), they often attributed their ratings to how mentors responded to mentee behavior (and not vice versa). For instance, they expressed concern over Mentor 22's English language skills and Mentor 5's prescriptive approach.

Despite the fact that the portfolios were limited in terms of their utility as a tool for comparative relationship quality assessments (a point taken up in the study limitations described below), they revealed quite a different perspective. The content of the portfolios showcased some of the activities the pair engaged in over duration of the program, and the reflective comments included by mentors and the few added by mentees often described emotional responses to the relationship and what they saw in each other, providing deeper insights into their own specific world. For example, Mentor 16 expressed disappointment with the way she was treated and indicated that the mentee was not meeting her expectations and the mentee in this relationship remarked on a change to the schedule of their meetings that had emotional consequences.

As demonstrated above, taking multiple perspectives gives context and richness to the understanding of mentoring relationships. This is also highlighted by the example of Pair 2, one of the divergent dyads. Taking one measurement – from either program staff, mentor, or mentee – would not have provided a thorough understanding of a highly complex relationship. If only the mentee survey had been used, this dyad would have been perceived as one of the most successful; using only the mentor survey would have characterized it as low quality. The program staff focus group presented a divided view which, in turn, needed the input from mentor and mentee surveys to make greater sense of the conflicts staff described. Collectively however, these perspectives provide an insight into the complicated nature of mentoring relationships. Echoing the findings of another recent study (Varga & Deutsch, 2016), this suggests that taking one measure of relationship quality is not necessarily sufficient for an accurate representation of a relationship, regardless of who the measure comes from.

Once divergent reports of relationship quality are identified and explanations for these patterns explored, it becomes pertinent to consider to what extent divergence matters. Previous research has shown that mentors tend to rate relationships lower than mentees (e.g., Farruggia & Bullen, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2014). It has also been suggested that mentee ratings of quality are more indicative of effectiveness (Goldner & Maysseless, 2009). Rhodes et al. (2014) found both

mentor and mentee reports of quality were predictors of relationship duration, although youth perceptions were marginally more predictive. This phenomena is, to some extent, present in this research. Of the three pairs who were classified as divergent, two were divergent on the basis of mentor giving low ratings compared to mentees giving high ratings. No dyads were classified divergent based on a low mentee rating.

Divergent ratings may raise questions about whose view should take precedence in cases of divergence. As noted above, there are several good arguments for prioritizing the viewpoint of mentees. Considering mentee views may be more likely to be indicative of effectiveness (or relationship duration, itself widely considered a benchmark of effectiveness; Rhodes et al., 2014), perhaps their rating is the most important. Although relationship quality should be an intrinsically desirable outcome, there are important effects which need to be seen to fulfil the long-held promise of mentoring. If mentee reports of relationship quality are better predictors of positive outcomes, this is a strong argument for their precedence. Also, since mentees are the target of intervention, their perspective on whether a mentoring relationship was a positive addition to their life is essential. On the other hand, evidence that utilizes both mentor and mentee relationship quality perspectives to predict mentee outcomes longitudinally is rare, as is the inclusion of staff perspectives on relationship quality in any youth mentoring research design. Further, we do not always recognize relationship features that are important for our development, despite the impact on relationship satisfaction (Overall, Deane, & Peterson, 2011). Thus, we are not in a position to offer a verdict on whose view should take precedence, nor do we want to suggest that any one view ever should.

Rather, this research underlines the value of creating space to allow all parties an opportunity to voice their perspectives. Providing space for mentees to share concern, especially when it comes to diverging reports of relationship quality, is vital because they are in the position with least power and agency. In many cases, mentee agency in the relationship is dependent on the mentor giving them space and opportunities for exercising agency (Li & Julian, 2012; Rhodes, Liang, & Spencer, 2009). Mentors who take a prescriptive approach do not afford their mentees these opportunities, hence the strong advocacy for developmental mentor approaches (Morrow & Styles, 1995). The youth and vulnerability of mentees places them in a position whereby they are reliant on adults to do what is right for them. If they have a negatively divergent perspective on the quality of their relationship, the responsibility is on mentors and program staff to respond accordingly. At the same time, giving mentors a safe space to openly reflect on their practice, including their frustrations and struggles, provides greater opportunity for staff to provide effective support and to share their own observations and advice based on practice wisdom accumulated from observing and supporting a range of mentoring relationships. This is in line with evidence that social practice is enhanced by opportunities for ongoing professional supervision (Beddoe & Davys, 2016).

The use of multiple perspectives also requires careful consideration of balance when assigning value labels to relationships. In particular, the authors have reflected on the risks of labelling some of the relationships assessed in this study as low quality. There are methodological tensions: the two pairs who met the criteria of negative convergence had the lowest mentee scores which, on the 5-point scale of the YMS, equate to 'pretty true' rather than 'not at all true' or 'a little true'. This suggests a middling, rather than low quality relationship. On the other hand, the staff focus group and, for Pair 16, the mentor's portfolio, provided evidence of a relationship with significant obstacles which they struggled to overcome. Youth mentoring is dedicated to transformative relationships which promote youth thriving. With current evidence pointing to high quality relationships as a mechanism of change, the benchmark for what is considered high (or good, or low) quality is lifted, and this is reflected in the interpretation of the data collected in this study.

6.1. Limitations

As a small-scale descriptive case study focused on a single delivery site of an SBM program in New Zealand, this research has a number of limitations that should be considered in interpreting the findings. A number of pragmatic constraints encountered in the implementation of the project also influenced the robustness of the research. For instance, this study only included nine of 26 mentoring dyads in the cohort. Although mentors responded positively to the research (21 of 26 mentors consented to participate), engaging mentees proved difficult. For ethical reasons, the researchers were unable to contact parents/caregivers directly, and thus relied on mentees to deliver information and consent forms which were sent home. Recruitment difficulties were anticipated given the program targets struggling students within schools in low-income communities. The families of the students are generally contending with a range of adverse circumstances that can understandably create barriers to engagement in initiatives beyond what is traditionally expected from their school communities. An incentive was provided to encourage mentees to pass the research information sheet and consent form to their parents. All mentees who agreed to take part in the study were entered into a prize draw for a \$50 shopping voucher, although this incentive had limited effect and it may be that the mentee represented in this research have fewer familial challenges than those who did not participate. Increased participation would have provided stronger evidence of the representativeness of the participating dyads to the larger program group. As noted earlier, the program staff agreed that the participants reflected the range of relationships within the larger cohort; however, this does not necessarily mean the findings included here are generalizable to other delivery sites of the same program, other programs in New Zealand, or internationally.

In terms of comparability of assessment, it would have been ideal to use a similar approach to obtain relationship quality perspectives across the informant groups. The approach taken with staff followed a fit-for-purpose strategy to gather relationship rankings along with focus group discussion to enable deep insights regarding justification of their decisions. A wholly different approach was taken with mentor and mentees. The use of a standardized instrument generally used for inferential statistical analysis of relationship quality with other relationship-relevant constructs was used to descriptively rank dyadic relationship quality and existing portfolios were analyzed to infer further relationship insights. A larger sample would have better enabled the use of the standardized scale as originally intended but the struggle with participant recruitment led us to use a descriptive approach. These methodological decisions were also driven by a need to obtain mentor and mentee perspectives more feasibly and efficiently than the methods used with staff. The school and program were reluctant to afford a lot of time during program delivery to collect mentor and mentee data due to the disruption caused to their curriculum and schedule, and access to the dyads would have been further limited if scheduled outside of regular program hours. At the same time, because the program staff were assumed to have a better distal view of all the relationships than the dyads who were more focused on their own relationship, asking staff to provide comparative rankings made sense. Replicating this with mentors and mentees would have breached our research ethics, as asking them to rank their own relationships against those of their peers could have caused distress for some participants.

Obtaining deeper qualitative mentee insights would have further enhanced the study. Because we understood the mentor portfolios to be an artefact of the relationship contributed to by both parties, we expected to obtain more evidence of mentee voice in this data source and we initially saw the value of using these portfolios to supplement mentor and mentee quantitative ratings instead of a more time intensive qualitative approach. Unfortunately, the qualitative perspective of the mentees were largely lost and, in truth, the mentors' perspectives were limited as a result of the lower than expected quality of this data

source.

Lastly, this study did not gather information from other parties identified by researchers (e.g., Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Keller, 2005) as potential informants of relationship quality. Although the perspectives of family, teachers, or peers may have been an interesting inclusion in this study, this was a SBM program with limited involvement of teachers or parents, and therefore it was unlikely these parties had enough time and interaction with dyads to be able to make judgements as to the quality of the mentoring relationships. Unlike other studies which have tapped into these perspectives, our research aimed to make use of the ability of program staff with enough knowledge to be able to make comparative assessments between dyads.

6.2. Future directions & implications

Considering the study limitations outlined above, we encourage researchers interested in mentoring relationship quality to explore other methods to obtain a combination of distal and experiential perspectives. Robust direct observation designs that supplement third party research observations with interviews or self-report questionnaires, such as that used by Pryce and Keller (2013; see also Pryce, 2012) are invaluable in advancing an evidence base that showcases the complexity of mentoring relationships while also aiding to clarify the dyadic mechanisms that promote relationship success and mentee outcomes. Methods that minimize recall and social desirability bias often found with global, retrospective reports are advisable, and methods that can tap into changes in perceptions and experiences over time, such as ecological momentary assessment (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008) or experience sampling methods (Larson, 1989) could be especially beneficial. However, these kinds of investigations would be more burdensome for program staff who would need to comment on multiple relationships at each assessment to provide the distal perspective, so this should be taken into consideration. Further, direct observation and repeated sampling methods are resource and time intensive designs. In the resource constrained environment that is typical for youth mentoring program delivery (Arnold & Cater, 2011), researchers working with single programs and practitioner-researchers engaging in internal evaluations of mentoring programs need methodological options that are less expensive and onerous.

Soliciting perspectives of program staff alongside mentor and mentee self-reports and utilizing artefacts of the relationship produced through existing processes (such as mentor-mentee portfolios) offer more feasible yet still valuable opportunities. We suggest recording conversations with staff as part of an embedded process of ongoing reflective practice that could also be used for research purposes. This could enhance reflective practice (for staff) and greater evaluative insight (for researchers) into the evolution of high quality mentoring relationships compared to a one-off discussion focused on comparative rankings. We also recommend that programs develop practice guidelines to support mentors to use portfolios as a tool for deeper ongoing self-reflection and collaboration with mentees that could serve a dual purpose in providing a rich source of research data. This connects to a broader practice implication highlighted by our findings. The triangulation of distal and experiential perspectives in this research highlights the value that multiple perspectives offer to understanding how a relationship is experienced, sometimes differently, by those within it and perceived by those looking on to it. This suggests that regular one-to-one conversations between program staff and mentors, staff and mentees, and between mentors and mentees about their perceptions and experiences could enhance reflective practice insights and produce a more aligned, shared understanding of relationship quality. Importantly, this would likely reveal areas needing more timely support and attention to enhance relationship quality particularly when not all parties are feeling fully satisfied.

6.3. Conclusion

Mentoring relationship quality is clearly an important topic for research about youth mentoring dyads. Given the connection between quality and effectiveness, it is imperative that researchers and practitioners continue to develop their understanding of relationship quality. In this article, we have argued that, alongside mentors and mentees, program staff can be an important source of information on relationship quality because staff provide a unique distal perspective on a range of mentoring relationships, especially in programs where staff have ongoing and direct observation of mentoring dyads and how they interact. The different foci of relationship quality assessment offered through the distal vs. experiential perspectives obtained in this study support our argument that future research on mentoring relationship quality should continue to seek a combination of perspectives. The complex interconnections between mentor, mentee, and program staff detailed here reinforce the importance of considering the relationships that surround mentoring dyads, to ensure every mentoring relationship is a high quality and positively life-changing one.

Acknowledgements

This work is based on a thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts of Hilary Dutton from The University of Auckland. The authors would like to thank Great Potentials Foundation for their support of this research, the individual staff, mentors and mentees who contributed their valuable time to participate, and the five anonymous reviewers who provided valuable feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by a University of Auckland Māori and Pacific Graduate Scholarship.

Conflict of interest

We wish to draw the attention of the Editor to the following facts which may be considered as potential conflicts of interest to this work.

- In 2012, as part of her university studies, the first author was a mentor for the program from which participants were recruited.
- During this time, one of the participating program staff was a tutor for the service-learning course the first author was enrolled in.
- The first author had no previous relationship with any of the mentors or mentees who participated.

There has been no financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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