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## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Meaningful Intergenerational Contact to Build Social Connections, Enhance Felt Understanding and Build Confidence in Future Community Social Action

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## ABSTRACT

Despite considerable research on the impact of intergenerational contact on attitudes and behaviours towards the other generation, very few studies have qualitatively explored the psychological processes which occur, nor have they tested the effect of such programmes on more generalised outcomes. In this paper, we examine the effect of an intergenerational contact intervention, centred around discussions of social issues with intergenerational conversation partners. Firstly, we analyse focus group and interview data with younger ( $n = 24$ ) and older ( $n = 10$ ) participants conducted following the programme. Thematic analysis is used to explore the psychological processes that occur during intergenerational contact that could drive attitude and behaviour change. This is complemented by a quantitative study in which we examine the impact of the intergenerational contact programme on key intergroup outcomes (confidence in contact, perceived similarity) and more generalised outcomes (confidence in community social action). Primary and secondary school aged children ( $N = 114$ ) completed survey measures prior to and following the intervention programme. Themes arising from the qualitative analysis showed a breakdown in stereotypes of older and younger generations. Additionally, further themes arising included intergroup felt understanding, self-disclosure, feeling heard and having voice, which we contend may drive intergenerational contact effects on intergenerational and more generalised outcomes. Analysis of survey responses revealed a significant boost in confidence in contact, perceived similarity, and confidence in social action (secondary school age pupils only) following the intergenerational contact programme. Methodological limitations are outlined and future directions for research discussed.

## 1 | Introduction

To combat ageism and improve age relations, local authorities and charities across the world fund community intergenerational programmes (IGPs; Giraudeau and Bailly 2019). In such interventions, younger and older participants are brought together to improve attitudes towards ageing and ageism (Drury et al. 2017). Many IGPs are based on Allport's (1954) contact hypotheses (e.g., Apriceno and Levy 2023; Kwong and

Yan 2021; Yaghoobzadeh et al. 2020); however, little is understood about how intergroup contact in such programmes impacts outcomes beyond intergenerational attitudes and behaviours. More evidence is needed regarding the effects of IGPs, including the wider generalised effects and the underlying processes driving these effects, which have been identified in other intergroup contexts (Bagci et al. 2019; Meleady et al. 2020). Using a mixed methods approach, the current research aims to address this gap by examining the efficacy of

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The Linking Network's IGP, which is centred on social action. Through focus groups and interviews with older and younger participants, the research aims to provide new, rich data on the experience of intergenerational contact in this context and potential processes driving its effects. In addition, using quantitative surveys, we test the primary and tertiary impact of this form of contact via pre-to-post increases in young people's confidence in contact, perceived similarity with older people, and confidence in future social action.

### 1.1 | Intergenerational Contact and Underlying Processes

It is well-established that IGPs that are based on the principles of intergroup contact have a positive impact on intergenerational attitudes of older and younger generations (e.g., Aday et al. 1993; Couper et al. 1991; Dellmann-Jenkins et al. 1994; Meshel and McGlynn 2004; see Apriceno and Levy 2023 for meta-analysis). The first aim of this study was to elucidate the processes underlying intergenerational (and intergroup) contact that drive attitude change and more generalised outcomes by examining the experience and outcomes of a social action-based intergenerational contact programme. Recent meta-analyses and reviews of intergroup contact research have highlighted the need to uncover the specific processes prompted by intergroup contact that lead to positive intergroup attitudes, as well as more general outcomes (Dovidio et al. 2017). Empirical studies exploring intergroup contact suggest that important pathways are a reduction in intergroup anxiety, increased empathy and knowledge (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). Within intergenerational contact specifically, identified processes are a reduction in ageing anxieties, an increase in positive intergenerational social norms, self-disclosure and inclusion of other in the self (Cadieux et al. 2019; Drury et al. 2016; Harwood et al. 2005).

We opted to explore potential psychological processes involved in intergenerational contact and outcomes using qualitative data collection and analysis. Interviews and focus groups provide the means to probe deeply participants' experience of contact exchanges and explore attitudes, understandings, feelings and emotions triggered by different aspects of the intergroup interaction. Likewise, prior studies exploring the processes driving intergenerational contact have employed similar qualitative methods (Teater 2018). This method is particularly valuable for eliciting rich data from young people. Thus, we developed a research interview protocol to focus on how intergenerational contact changes intergroup attitudes, in addition to feelings and understandings triggered as a result of contact, and impressions of how the other generation's views changed as a result of the intergroup contact experience.

### 1.2 | Ageism, Perceived Similarity and 'Confidence in Contact'

The second aim of the research was to examine the impact of the social-action based intergenerational contact programme on young people's perceived similarity of younger and older age groups and their confidence in contact with older adults. Intergroup contact brings outgroup members closer to the self

(Gaertner et al. 1990, 1993), which can be interpreted as perceived similarity of the outgroup member to the self. Meanwhile, research in various intergroup contexts has established a positive relationship between intergroup contact and perceived similarity in children and adolescents (e.g., McGlothlin and Killen 2005; Stathi et al. 2014; Yu et al. 2021). Emphasising similarities between age groups features as both an important element of intergenerational contact theory (Fox and Giles 1993) and a design element of IGPs (Couper et al. 1991; Drury et al. 2017). Thus, we expect this current IGP to lead to greater perceptions of similarities across the age groups.

According to Turner and Cameron's (2016) model, 'confidence in contact' reflects a state of readiness for positive interactions with a member of another group, whereby children (and adults) have the necessary confidence, skills, beliefs, and experience for successful intergroup contact. Specifically, confidence in contact encapsulates a range of psychological processes including (but not limited to) reduced intergroup anxiety, strong behavioural scripts for contact, a perception that identity is secure and accepted, and intercultural competence (Turner and Cameron 2016). Individuals with high 'confidence in contact' are more likely to respond positively, and engage with, cross-group peers in diverse settings. A unique aspect of the model is its focus on preparation for diverse interactions, including the role of previous successful and positive contact experiences, that may promote confidence in contact, and in turn successful interactions and friendships across group lines. Recent studies support this theory in the context of children's ethnically diverse friendships, and highlight the importance of prior contact, indirect contact, intergroup anxiety and social norms as sources of confidence in contact (Bagci et al. 2020). Interestingly, while other theories of prejudice-reduction focus on changing attitudes to the other, the 'confidence in contact' model focuses on how contact can change how we see ourselves (i.e., our beliefs in our own ability to engage successfully in intergroup interactions).

Intergenerational contact's relationship with reduced ageism operates via similar processes to those involved in confidence in contact, including prior direct contact, indirect contact, reduced intergroup anxiety and positive social norms (Drury et al. 2016). We expect that participation in the current IGP will reduce young participants' intergenerational anxiety and improve their positive social norms about contact with older adults, thus leading to greater confidence in intergenerational contact. Moreover, the collaborative nature of the direct contact experience tested here is likely to provide behavioural scripts and intergenerational competence to further boost confidence.

### 1.3 | Intergenerational Contact and Social Action

In a recent theoretical development, Meleady et al. (2019) proposes that the impact arising from positive intergroup contact can generalise outside of intergroup relations. This 'tertiary effect' occurs via a process known as cognitive liberalisation, whereby contact not only changes intergroup attitudes, but changes how we think about the world, making us open to new ways of thinking and solving problems more generally (Hodson et al. 2018; Meleady et al. 2019). Empirical support for this effect is provided across four studies, which demonstrate that

intercultural contact can benefit environmental attitudes and behaviours (Meleady et al. 2020).

To date, little is known about the effects of *intergenerational* contact on outcomes beyond the intergroup domain. Reviews of a-theoretical IGPs suggest that older participants benefit from improved mental health, self-esteem and quality of life, plus reduced loneliness (Gualano et al. 2018; Lee et al. 2020), but the wider effects for younger participants of IGPs are not so reliable (Aemmi and Karimi Moonaghi 2017; Park 2015). Thus, we sought to explore if participation in the current IGP could influence outcomes beyond intergenerational attitudes and relationships, namely social action within the younger participants' community. We define community social action as taking part in group activities to improve the lives of those in one's community and other issues that are important to that community. These may include actions to address a wide range of issues such as inequalities related to healthcare and education, food insecurities or climate change. As such, we categorise community social action as a potential tertiary effect of intergenerational contact.

According to the cognitive liberalisation theory (Hodson et al. 2018) intergroup contact has the potential to change how individuals solve problems and think about the world. During contact, individuals become aware of a broader range of perspectives that challenge their ideologies and worldviews. Assimilating these challenges can loosen existing cognitive rigidities, leading to cognitive liberalisation. Liberalisation enhances cognitive flexibility by improving creativity and problem-solving skills and encourages more deprovincialised mindsets (Hodson et al. 2018). Correspondingly, cognitive liberalisation contains both a cognitive and a socio-cultural dimension (Fuochi et al. 2024). We argue that both dimensions will facilitate contact participants' confidence to solve community-based problems, regardless of whether the problems are focused on inequality issues or those that are less social, such as climate change or environmental issues. Interaction with an older contact partner should challenge young participants' viewpoints, leading them to be more creative and supportive of social diversity (i.e., cognitively liberated). This may be particularly the case when contact partners expect each other to have opposing views on topics of discussion. An increase in innovation and egalitarianism should lead to more confidence to solve community social issues in the future.

There is good evidence to suggest intergenerational contact could boost confidence in community social action: positive intergroup contact predicts greater support for social change and motivation for specific social actions to support equality (e.g., Di Bernardo et al. 2021; Vezzali et al. 2022; Wright and Lubensky 2009). It is acknowledged that contact between disadvantaged and advantaged groups can create unfavourable effects on social change for the low status group (Reimer and Sengupta 2023). However, this should not be an issue for intergenerational contact where both younger and older groups are viewed as low status (Garstka et al. 2004). Furthermore, over and above social action motivated by inequalities, recent research has linked intergroup contact with action on environmental issues unconnected with the intergroup context (e.g.,

Meleady et al. 2020). Demonstrated via cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, positive intercultural contact is related to improved pro-environmentalism (greater environmental concern and behaviours and reduced climate change denial). In line with the cognitive liberalisation theory, this tertiary effect was driven by lower endorsement of inequality-based ideology (Social Dominance Orientation; Pratto et al. 1994).

One laboratory experiment focused on intergenerational contact adds weight to our argument. Kessler and Staudinger (2007) identified outcomes of a broader, non-intergroup nature whereby adolescents were more likely to engage in prosocial behaviours after contact. Dyads collaborated on a 'difficult life-problem' task, to develop recommendations and advice to help a hypothetical person accomplish life goals they had not yet achieved. Young participants in the intergenerational dyad condition reported greater post-task prosocial behaviours (i.e., volunteering to support ill children in hospital) than those in the same-aged dyad condition. Although this study was not based on the more recent theoretical advancement of tertiary transfer effects of contact (Meleady et al. 2019), we believe these findings provide additional evidence to support our hypotheses.

Overall, building on cognitive liberalisation theory and previous research that tests the impact of contact on social action to support equality, environmental action and prosocial behaviours, the current research focused on future community social action, that is, confidence in one's ability to complete a community social action in the future. We expect participation in the current IGP to give rise to cognitive liberalisation, which will provide the creativity, problem-solving skills and egalitarianism to solve community-based issues or issues important to the local community, and thus boost confidence in future social action in the local community.

#### 1.4 | An IGP to Promote Positive Attitudes and Social Action

Although they are quite different intergroup contexts, interracial dialogue programmes may provide some clues as to how IGPs could also be designed to improve relations between different generations. Interracial dialogue programmes involve participants from different racial and cultural groups discussing sensitive race-related issues. Within the field of race relations and education, they have been shown to have a number of benefits including increased perspective-taking ability, comfort in communicating about differences, and participants' motivation and confidence in their ability to take social action on societal issues, such as promoting diversity and challenging social issues (Eveland and Appiah 2019; Nagda and Zúñiga 2003; Nagda et al. 2009, 2004; Spencer et al. 2008; Zúñiga 2003).

In recent years, age-relations have been beset by conflicts related to national politics, that is, Brexit, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bristow 2021; Drury et al. 2022; Meisner 2021; Roy and Ayalon 2022; Sipocz et al. 2021). Thus, many community and national issues form the basis of tensions between younger and older generations. To our



knowledge, there has been no previous research exploring the effects of discussing sensitive cross-generational issues with intergenerational conversation partners; instead, IGPs focus on activities such as arts and crafts projects, problem-solving tasks and talent shows (Aday et al. 1993; Couper et al. 1991; Meshel and McGlynn 2004). It could be expected that the process of discussing and collaborating on an issue where there are perceived differences in experiences and views of younger and older people provides opportunities to share views, learn about the other perspectives, and undermine the expected stereotypic behaviour from the contact partners. This in turn may improve intergenerational attitudes, as well as generalised effects including strengthening confidence in social action.

The IGP tested here was designed and implemented by the education charity The Linking Network. Mixed age groups worked on various issues chosen by the young people, including LGBTQ rights, prescription charges, men's mental health, food banks, and poverty. These were social issues of local and national importance in the United Kingdom, and issues where younger and older people might expect to hold differing views (e.g., Helms and Waters 2016). By situating the interactions of the current programme in contexts where younger and older participants may expect to hold differing views, it was expected that intergenerational discussions about the topics would lead to far-reaching, rich discussions that bring up differing views and experiences. In this way, the intervention aimed to elicit a greater challenge to stereotypes and encourage intergenerational knowledge exchange in a bid to improve confidence in intergenerational relationships (Turner and Cameron 2016) and enact social action in the community.

## 1.5 | The Current Study

The current research evaluated the impact of The Linking Network's IGP. The programme took place in 2022–2023 in England. It involved bringing together younger and older people once a week over a period of 6 weeks. In this programme, younger people are considered 18 years and younger, and older people are considered 55 years and over.

The current study's aims were to (1) understand the potential processes experienced during intergenerational contact programmes that support change in intergroup attitudes and behaviour, and social action and (2) uncover the extent to which the IGP strengthens two established outcomes of intergroup contact 'confidence in contact' (Turner and Cameron 2016) and perceived similarity (Yu et al. 2021) and empowers, motivates and boosts participant confidence in future community social action. Semi-structured interviews were used to better understand the experience of intergenerational contact, and identify the potential processes involved. Responses were participant-led; therefore, we had no formal predictions. It was expected that following participation in the intergenerational contact programme, participants would express increased confidence in contact, increased perceived similarity and greater confidence in taking social action in their local community.

## 2 | Method

### 2.1 | Participants

Young participants (aged 9–15 years) were recruited from four mixed sex, public schools (three secondary, one primary) in the United Kingdom. These schools were recruited to take part in the intergenerational contact programme in 2022–2023. Schools varied in the selection methods used to recruit the young people. In primary school, whole classes took part. In secondary schools, young people were recruited from across year groups via existing school clubs or roles, for example, School Council, prefects. Another secondary school selected pupils who were completing a qualification where gaining experience working directly with older people would be beneficial. In some cases, secondary school pupils also recruited friends to take part.

The initial sample at Time 1 (pre-intervention) consisted of 114 participants ( $n_{\text{primaryschool}} = 53$ ;  $n_{\text{secondaryschool}} = 61$ ). The same young people completed the survey again at Time 2. While primary school participant data could be matched pre to post, it was not possible to match data at an individual level in secondary schools. Therefore, responses at pre- and post- measures were treated as independent for all analyses. Survey participant gender was unavailable. A sub-sample of the secondary school participants took part in a focus group ( $n = 24$ , across 8 focus groups), with 2–4 young people in each focus group. Older participants were recruited via local civic organisations (e.g., local Rotary Club), social media, local newsletters, and programme facilitators contacts. Thirty-six older people took part in the programme; 10 older adults (5 males, 5 females) with an age range of 64–79 years (mean age 70 years and 6 months) accepted the invitation to take part in an online interview following participation in the programme. Due to logistic reasons, it was not possible for older people to complete the surveys; therefore, quantitative data were not collected from these participants.

### 2.2 | Design

For the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with older and younger participants, respectively. These lasted around 30–45 min each and were conducted online. Interviews and focus groups were conducted 2–4 weeks after completion of the intervention by an experienced interviewer (first author) who had not been involved in the delivery of the programme. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Quantitative data, which were collected with youth participants only (due to constraints in access to older people), were gathered using a field-experimental design. It employed a single cohort longitudinal approach across two time intervals, pre-intervention (2 weeks before programme began) and post-intervention (immediately after programme ended). The dependent variables were perceived similarity to older people (McGlothlin and Killen 2005; Yu et al. 2021) and confidence in contact with older people (Bagci et al. 2020), both outcomes that have been previously examined among young people. Self-efficacy for community social action has not previously been examined, though self-efficacy

for prosocial behaviours and bystander behaviour has previously been tested in young people (e.g., Yüksel et al. 2021). Therefore, these are considered developmentally appropriate outcome measures for intergroup contact interventions.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Kent Ethics Committee. Parents/carers were informed about the activities and had an opportunity to opt their child out of the experience. Young people and older people gave consent to participate in the contact programme, research and audio recording of interviews. The researcher was not present during the contact intervention.

The IGP was designed by The Linking Network, a national education charity working with 20,000 young people across England annually. The IGP was a stand-alone educational programme that took place in the young people's school and consisted of 6 sessions, each lasting 1–3 h, and supported by two experienced programme facilitators. Younger and older people worked together in groups (usually consisting of 3–4 young people, and 1–2 older people) focusing on a specific social issue selected by the young people prior to their first meeting. In this case, groups worked on a range of issues, including the environment, LGBTQ rights, prescription charges, mental health in general and specifically men's mental health, food banks, education, and poverty. These were social issues of local and national importance in the United Kingdom. Each group worked on one issue throughout the sessions. The programme culminated in a plan of action and a piece of work (e.g., poems, artwork, zines and posters) representing the selected issue and possible solutions. The plan of action could be on any level, local, national or global. Groups shared their own knowledge and views and conducted their own research on their selected topic. The programme followed approximately the same format and timeline in each school: the first session consisted of idea-generation activities with younger people and programme facilitators to identify social issues they would like to work on with the older people and select their favourite. The next session involved both age groups in getting-to-know-you type questions and relationship-building exercises before moving on to explore the chosen issue. The next three sessions involved the same groups, further discussion and production of an action plan and creative output. Across all sessions, there was time for participants to get to know each other and share personal information about themselves, alongside exploring the chosen issue. The final session was a 'Listening Session', in which the young people presented their social issue and output to the other groups, senior school staff and local community members involved in community social action.

The researchers were recruited to evaluate the programme and were not involved in the design or delivery of the intervention sessions.

## 2.3 | Dependent Measures

### 2.3.1 | Qualitative Questions and Analysis

Younger and older participants took part in a semi-structured focus group or interview, and were asked what they enjoyed about the programme, what made it memorable, if and how

they benefited from it, and how they believed the other generation benefited. Further prompts were used where necessary around specific potential outcomes, for example, do you think it changed your view of older people, or not? Interviews and focus groups (conducted by the first author) loosely adhered to an interview protocol to ensure the above topics were addressed. However, interviews and focus groups were guided by the participants and what they believed to be important outcomes or notable aspects of the programme. The interview questions were open initially but were guided by our overarching theoretical bases (i.e., intergroup contact) follow-up questions and prompts.

Interviews (and focus groups) were transcribed and underwent inductive reflexive thematic analysis, allowing us to identify both semantic and latent meanings, and allow both descriptive and interpretive accounts of the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). This approach also provided theoretical flexibility, allowing us to use relevant psychological theories to inform our analysis and interpretation of themes identified in the data. The inductive approach was adopted to provide a rich analysis that represents the meanings as communicated by the participants. However, a level of deductive reasoning was used to ensure the meanings emphasised in the analysis were relevant to our research questions concerning intergenerational contact, its impact and driving mechanisms.

Reflexive analysis highlights the active role researchers have in knowledge production and acknowledges the researcher's subjective position, who they are, and how they have influenced the research process in terms of their personal identities, values, and disciplinary perspectives (Braun and Clarke 2022). The first and third authors of this paper led this analysis. See [Supporting Information](#) for positionality statement.

Analysis was conducted using the six-phase analytic process set out by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), a method in qualitative analysis that allows researchers to uncover patterns of meaning, while valuing the subjective and questioning role of the researcher (Braun and Clarke 2006). The six steps are as follows: (1) data set familiarisation, (2) generating initial codes, (3) initial theme generation, (4) theme refining and reviewing, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing up. Following data familiarisation, the first author made observations and annotated transcripts, coding data according to themes and observations. Initial coding was completed at a semantic level, and this progressed to a deeper analytic approach as responses were considered in relation to theories of intergroup contact and intergroup relations. Therefore, a more latent approach was taken as coding progressed. Codes were then reviewed and overlapping and related themes were identified, refined and developed. Themes and codes were discussed with the third author as a means of 'sense checking' and to consider the themes in relation to theoretical approaches to intergroup contact (Braun and Clarke 2022).

### 2.3.2 | Quantitative Survey

**2.3.2.1 | Confidence in Contact.** Secondary school participants were asked: 'How confident do you feel in talking to and spending time with people who are a different generation

from you?’ and primary school participants were asked ‘How confident do you feel in talking to older people?’ Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-scale from 1 (*not at all confident*) to 5 (*completely confident*). This item is developed from the Cross Ethnic Friendship Self-Efficacy scale (Bagci et al. 2020).

**2.3.2.2 | Perceived Similarity/Difference.** Primary school pupils only were asked the following question: ‘Do you think younger and older people are similar or different to each other?’ This is derived from previous research examining children’s perceived intergroup similarity/difference (McGlothlin and Killen 2005). Participants responded on a 4-point Likert-scale from 1 (*very different*) to 4 (*very similar*).

**2.3.2.3 | Confidence in Future Community Social Action.** All younger participants were asked: ‘How confident do you feel in making a positive difference in your community?’ (*secondary*) and ‘How confident do you feel in making the world a better place?’ (*primary*). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-scale from 1 (*not at all confident*) to 5 (*completely confident*).

### 3 | Results

First, we report the thematic analysis of the interviews and focus groups. The second section of the results reports on our survey findings, testing the effectiveness of the programme in primary and secondary school pupils separately.

#### 3.1 | Thematic Analysis

Two inter-related themes were identified that reveal more about the underlying processes of intergenerational contact based around areas of intergenerational conflict or difference. These were: (1) The importance of felt understanding (2) Need for, and importance of, meaningful interactions for successful intergroup contact. Details of each theme are provided below including excerpts which are attributed to older and younger participants following each quote with ‘OP’ and ‘YP’ respectively.

##### 3.1.1 | Theme 1: Felt Understanding

Feeling understood on an interpersonal level is important for building healthy relationships. At group level, felt understanding reflects the extent to which individuals believe their own group’s perspectives, beliefs, values and experiences are understood and accepted by members of an outgroup (Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, and Rothers 2020). Intergroup felt understanding is thought to involve the following elements: it requires members of a group to understand another group, and for that understanding to be communicated towards and detected by the outgroup members. Two sub-themes were identified from our interviews that reflect these requirements: (1) Effect of intergenerational contact on stereotypes and understanding of the other generation; (2) Effect of intergenerational contact on intergroup felt understanding.

**3.1.1.1 | Sub-Theme 1: Effect of Intergenerational Contact on Stereotypes and Understanding of the Other Generation.** Reflecting on their beliefs prior to participation in the IGP, younger and older participants both believed the other generation holds significant, negative stereotypes about their generation (i.e., meta-stereotypes). Older people believed that younger people might think they are ‘dodderly’, stuck in their ways and not open to ideas.

They maybe regarded us as old people, and that we would have walking sticks and grey hair, if any hair, and false teeth and be short of money and not open to new ideas and not active, that sort of thing. (OP)

Indeed, young people held negative stereotypes of older people as closed off and narrow-minded. These came out in discussions about their expectations of the IGP.

I was feeling apprehensive of just that stereotype, [that] narrow minded conversation. (YP)

Meanwhile, younger participants believed the older generation would expect them to be incommunicative, on their phones all the time, or on video games. They also thought older participants would expect younger people to be badly behaved and engage in delinquent anti-social behaviours. This was often based on previous negative or mixed experiences with older people. Younger people also thought older people expected them to lack knowledge of or be ill-informed on social issues.

One older participant explicitly referred to COVID-19 and how that compounded stereotypes and a lack of understanding between generations:

You would see either on Facebook or general chat that the teenagers are all gathering together, no social distancing, they don’t care about spreading COVID. All this sort of stuff. And then likewise, younger children would think older people have it much easier. ... That, sort of, just not understanding. (OP)

A consistent finding across interviews with younger and older participants is that the IGP effectively challenged stereotypes and created new understandings across the generations. This was achieved via the programme structure and activities, which created opportunities to challenge preconceived stereotypes of the other generation. Many older participants reported that they were surprised by the young people’s maturity, their knowledge on the topic and their well-formulated ideas.

It surprised me how much that they really cared about what was going on, about the big building, about looking after the environment, the recycling side of things. (OP)

I wasn’t expecting them to know too much about the subject areas that they had raised as ones of concern. (OP)

They were more serious than I expected and actually focused on some of the issues and I didn't think they would come over as mature and as able to think things through as they were. (OP)

I think their ideas and concerns was far more far better formulated than I expected it to be, which is a credit to them. (OP)

As well as being surprised by how knowledgeable the younger people were, older participants consistently remarked on younger people's willingness to communicate with them, which they were surprised by, and appreciated. This is explored in greater depth in Theme 2.

Young people also reported having their stereotypes of older people challenged. Going into the interaction, younger people's intergroup anxiety was in part due to stereotypic expectations around older people being closed-minded and not respecting their views. Young people reported that in practice, interactions flowed easily and older people listened to them. Young people also reported that, contrary to expectations, older people actually expressed ideas and views that were more similar to their own.

Like I thought they were going to be like, really different to us, right? Really different views, and so some thought, like, that it might be really awful conversations. (YP)

When we met the older people, we realized they weren't actually much different from us. (YP)

You'd think they'd be quite different views and that different feelings because, but it's like we sort of more similar. (YP)

As well as breaking down stereotypes and increasing perceived similarity, older people and younger people felt as a result of the project that they had a better understanding of the lives of the other generation, including their everyday lives and struggles. This triggered a level of empathy for the younger generation.

Their lives have been much more complicated than mine was at that age ... You know, I had mum and dad and two siblings, and often they've had marriage change and all sorts of issues like that ... There's a sense that they've dealt with quite a lot of personal stuff already. (OP)

We've learned a lot from them...not necessarily about any of the topics, but a lot about how youngsters are like in school. (OP)

These findings highlight the importance and value placed on 'understanding' by the participants. They also illustrate the

benefits of intergenerational discussions around issues on which they may expect to hold different views for triggering conversations that create new understandings across generations. Through structured activities and support provided by facilitators, participants were able to engage in discussions and collaborations on topics upon which they may initially expect to disagree. These conversations appear to be crucial in challenging stereotypes and meta-stereotypes, and developing understanding across the generations.

**3.1.1.2 | Sub-Theme 2: Effects of Intergenerational Contact on Intergroup Felt Understanding.** The previous sub-theme (described above) concerns awareness of potential stereotypes groups may have about each other (meta-stereotypes), as well as reported changes in understanding of the other generation. The second sub-theme concerns 'intergroup felt understanding'. Intergroup felt understanding requires there to be opportunities for group members to express or signal their understanding to the other group, and for that to be detected by other group members (Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, and Rothers 2020). The interview data suggest this intergenerational contact programme provided opportunities to both express and detect intergroup understanding.

Crucially, participants were aware of the improved understanding in the other group.

Older people reported that the programme gave younger people a better understanding or 'insight' into the older generation, and their valuable role in society:

The fact that it gave these kids a, I think a, probably a better insight as to how the older generation, how exactly fits into society ... A better understanding of the older generation..... I mean like what they've got to offer. (OP)

They also believed that through the IGP, younger people could see that older people did not all view them in a negative light:

It was quite an eye opener to quite a lot of the students ... That it's not just their own family and their own grandparents or whatever, but that others didn't see them in a very negative light. (OP)

That is, through the positive interactions, older people believed they had a chance to demonstrate their understanding and respect for younger people.

Meanwhile, younger people believed intergenerational linking created a chance for older people to get to know all sides of young people, and not rely on one-dimensional negative stereotypes of them not being serious and being delinquents: intergenerational linking was seen by younger people as a chance to show they are mature, can contribute constructively to discussion, and have good ideas. Relatedly, young people thought the programme successfully changed how older people thought about the younger generation, and this was a result of the



programme's focus and format, specifically the discussion of issues of intergenerational conflict. According to younger people, the programme discussion tasks allowed young people to demonstrate their knowledge of the social issues, causing older people to realise how knowledgeable young people are about the world around them, and how much they care about these issues and their local community.

They realized that we also care about the important big issues in the world. (YP)

I think they were surprised about how much we knew. They were surprised that we knew so much about it. (YP)

Younger people also thought the programme instigated discussions and comparisons between the younger and older generations, which improved the older generations understanding of young people:

Educated them [older people] a little bit on us as people and young people as a whole (YP).

Younger people also reported that the interactions they had with older people boosted their sense of intergroup felt understanding. The programme itself provided opportunities for older people to demonstrate their intergroup understanding, which younger people detected in the interaction:

I think it made us realize that the older people are aware of our generations, issues and stuff. (YP)

He was agreeing with stuff that we said because he realises, like, it's, it's changed since I was younger. (YP)

Older people thought interpersonal interactions and conversational elements of the programme were crucial for building relations, breaking down barriers, and effectively challenging stereotypes. For them, positive intergroup interactions were an integral part of the process of building felt understanding:

It was also good that we were able to talk to the young people as well ... it sort of, like, did break down some barriers. You know, we weren't those funny old frosty people. We were actually human. (OP)

### 3.1.2 | Theme 2: Need for, and Importance of, Meaningful Interactions

This second major theme reflects two additional processes that may promote felt understanding. Two sub-themes were identified: (1) Opportunities for reciprocal self-disclosure, (2) Importance of feeling heard, valued, and respected.

#### 3.1.2.1 | Sub-Theme1: Opportunities for Self-Disclosure.

The intergenerational contact programme prompted

meaningful conversations, where individuals shared information about themselves and their lives. As a result, participants really got to know each other on an individual level, breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes.

In my conversation with the young lads, I had a little team of about three or four or five 14-year-olds, and they finally expressed to me how difficult it was for them to say when they were feeling upset. (OP)

Older and younger people reported many conversations that were not 'on task', but allowed them to learn more about each other's lives:

I did like chatting to the to them, I really did. Because we found it quite difficult to stay on task ... because we just tended to talk ... I had to drag them back and say, look, we're supposed to be doing this. (OP)

The self-disclosure between the generations also allowed the participants to hold meaningful conversations centred around young and older people's home and family lives, school, their hopes and ambitions. These conversations allowed the participants to have their preconceived ideas and stereotypes of the other generation challenged in a gentle and constructive manner:

There is this sort of view that kids nowadays are entitled brats and they don't appreciate ... what's been done and these [young people] obviously didn't. They were grateful for, you know, the efforts that the parent was making and made you know, appreciated that ... the parents were actually making sacrifices for them. (OP)

**3.1.2.2 | Sub-Theme 2: Importance of Feeling Heard, Valued and Respected.** For younger people, it was particularly important that they felt heard and respected within the interaction: younger people routinely referred to the fact that the older people really listened to them and valued what they said.

If anything, they saw our ideas were more important if anything. (YP)

It felt very equal. (YP)

I think they respected me, I really do, yeah. (YP)

For them, feeling listened to was an essential aspect of the interaction, and conveyed respect. The fear that they would not be listened to was, in part, driving their anxiety about the IGP: prior to its start, younger people had concerns that the older generations would take over the project, telling them what to do without listening to them. This was evident across all schools:

Before stating the programme I was a little bit nervous ... I didn't know if they'd go into it with some

views already. Like I didn't know that, like the older generation go into it with the view that our view isn't as important. (OP)

Meanwhile, when discussing the interaction with younger people, older participants routinely referred to the need for younger people to communicate with them: for them, this was essential for meaningful, high quality interactions. Their anxieties prior to beginning the IGP were centred around the fear that younger people would not talk with them, either due to lack of social skills or because they didn't want to talk to the older people.

I thought there would be a lot of shyness, a lot of reticence. (OP)

My main sort of doubt ... was how well that kids would communicate with older people. (OP)

By focusing on a social issue important to young people and encouraging conversations around this issue, the programme instigated interactions where young people felt listened to, felt their ideas were valued, and felt respected. They felt they were being treated as equals in the interaction. Meanwhile, older people felt younger people were making an effort to talk with them and engage with them in conversation.

### 3.2 | Survey Findings

While primary school participant data could be matched pre to post, it was not possible to match secondary school data at an individual level in secondary schools. Therefore, responses at pre- and post-measures were treated as independent for all analyses. To examine the randomness of missing data across pre- and post-measures across primary and secondary school data, Little's MCAR tests were conducted using the `mcAR_test` function in the `nanair` package (Tierney and Cook 2023). The test was non-significant for both primary school data ( $\chi^2(13)=13.66$ ,  $p=0.398$ ) and secondary school data ( $\chi^2(8)=10.40$ ,  $p=0.238$ ), indicating that the missing data pattern is consistent with missing completely at random (MCAR).

A series of ordinal logistic regressions (OLRs) using the `polr` function from the `MASS` package (Venables and Ripley 2002) in R Statistical Software (v4.4.0; R Core Team, 2024) were conducted. These analyses compared pre- and post-intervention responses for each question and incorporated comparison of school setting (primary vs. secondary) for confidence in contact and confidence in social action questions.<sup>1</sup> Proportional odds tests using the `poTest` function from the 'car' package (Fox and Weisberg 2019) were carried out to check the assumption of proportional odds were met for each OLR model. The tests revealed no significant violations of the proportional odds assumption for the overall models ( $ps>0.124$ ), individual predictor variables ( $ps>0.201$ ) or interaction terms (included in two models;  $ps>0.095$ ). To test assumptions of multicollinearity, Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) computed using the `vif()` function in the `car` package for all predictors included in the confidence in contact and confidence in social action models. All VIFs were close to 1 (VIF ranges: confidence in contact 1.0015–1.0020;

confidence in social action 1.008–1.017), indicating no evidence of multicollinearity.

To allow interpretation of main effects and interactions in the main analyses, sum-to-zero contrasts were used for time-point comparisons (pre [−1] vs. post [1] intervention) and for school setting (primary [−1] vs. secondary [1]), where applicable. Where interactions were significant, follow-up OLR models were conducted to compare school settings at each time point and to compare time points within each school setting. Treatment contrasts (0,1) were used in these post hoc models to enable direct comparisons between time points and school settings.

Only primary school age participants completed the perceived similarity item and the analysis revealed a significant main effect of time, indicating that, on average, primary school pupils reported significantly higher perceived similarity to older people at post-intervention compared to pre-intervention ( $\beta=0.47$ , 95% CI[0.073, 0.87],  $t=2.32$ ,  $p=0.020$ ).

For confidence in contact, the analysis revealed a significant main effect of time ( $\beta=0.77$ , 95% CI[0.49, 1.04],  $t=5.49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), indicating that, on average, participants had greater odds of reporting higher confidence levels post-intervention compared to pre-intervention. There was also a significant main effect of school setting ( $\beta=0.29$ , 95% CI[0.03, 0.55],  $t=2.17$ ,  $p=0.030$ ), indicating that across both time points secondary school-aged pupils had greater confidence in contact compared to primary school-aged pupils. There was no interaction between school setting and time ( $\beta=0.12$ , 95% CI[−0.14, 0.38],  $t=−0.88$ ,  $p=0.38$ ), indicating the change in odds of reporting higher confidence from pre to post was similar across primary and secondary school pupils.

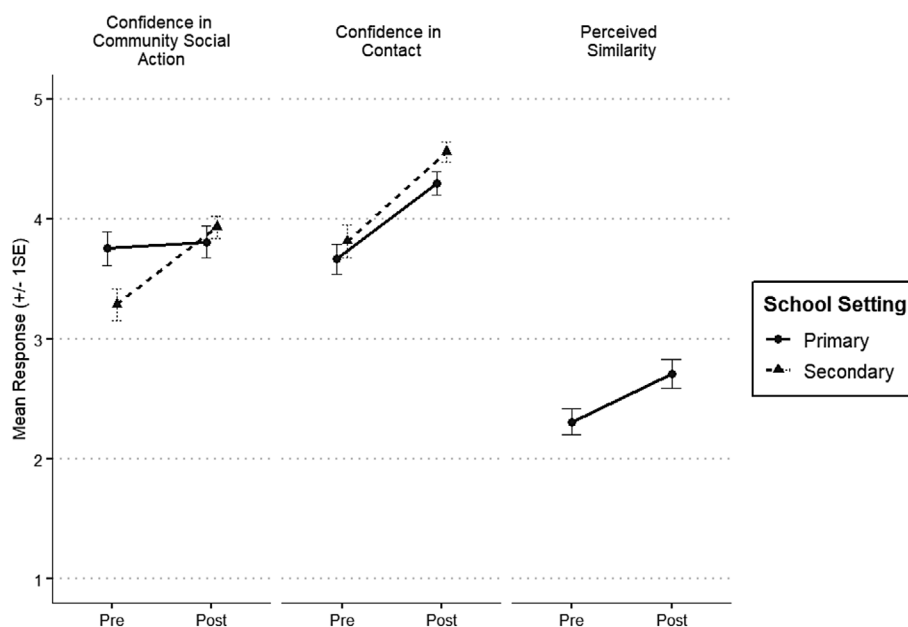
For confidence in community social action, there was no significant main effect of school setting ( $\beta=−0.22$ , 95% CI[−0.47, 0.04],  $t=−1.68$ ,  $p=0.093$ ). However, there was a significant main effect of time ( $\beta=0.35$ , 95% CI[0.10, 0.61],  $t=2.72$ ,  $p=0.007$ ) and a significant two-way interaction of time by school setting ( $\beta=0.29$ , 95% CI[0.04, 0.55],  $t=2.27$ ,  $p=0.023$ ). Post hoc analyses revealed no significant difference in post-intervention responses between school settings ( $\beta=0.17$ , 95% CI[−0.55, 0.89],  $t=0.47$ ,  $p=0.64$ ) and no difference in pre- versus post-intervention in primary school pupils ( $\beta=0.055$ , 95% CI[−0.32, 0.43],  $t=0.29$ ,  $p=0.77$ ). However, for the pre-intervention measure, pupils in primary school settings reported significantly greater confidence in social action compared to pupils in secondary school settings ( $\beta=−0.88$ , 95% CI[−1.60, −0.16],  $t=−2.39$ ,  $p=0.017$ ). Crucially, secondary school pupils showed a significant increase in confidence in community social action from pre-intervention to post-intervention ( $\beta=0.66$ , 95% CI[0.31, 1.02],  $t=3.70$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). See Table 1 for all means and standard deviations by age group and Figure 1 for mean and standard error of responses by question and by school setting.

## 4 | Discussion

The aims of this mixed method study were to (1) understand the experiences of and potential processes involved in a social-action

**TABLE 1** | Means and standard deviations of key variables as a function of age group.

	Primary school		Secondary school	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Confidence in contact with older people	3.67 (0.83) <i>n</i> = 45	4.30 (0.69) <i>n</i> = 47	3.82 (1.05) <i>n</i> = 60	4.56 (0.65) <i>n</i> = 59
Perceived similarity to older people	2.31 (0.73) <i>n</i> = 45	2.71 (0.82) <i>n</i> = 45	N/A	N/A
Confidence for future social action	3.76 (0.93) <i>n</i> = 45	3.81 (0.90) <i>n</i> = 47	3.29 (1.03) <i>n</i> = 59	3.93 (0.71) <i>n</i> = 60

**FIGURE 1** | Mean and standard errors for key variables as a function of age group.

based IGP that supports change in intergroup attitudes and behaviour, and community social action and (2) uncover the extent to which the social-action based IGP enhances intergenerational confidence in contact, increases perceived similarity, and boosts participant confidence in future social action in their community. It was expected that following participation in the programme, participants would express increased confidence in contact, increased perceived similarity and greater confidence in taking social action in their local community.

An evaluation of a 6-week intergenerational contact programme, designed and implemented by The Linking Network, and centred around community social action, was conducted. Thematic analysis of interviews with younger (secondary school pupils) and older people revealed two major themes: (1) the importance of felt understanding as an outcome and a potential process driving the intergenerational contact effect, (2) the importance of reciprocal self-disclosure, and of being heard and listened to, for older and younger people respectively. Analysis of survey responses revealed a significant increase in confidence in interacting with an older person (among primary and secondary school pupils), a significant increase in perceived similarity (among primary school pupils), and, among secondary school pupils only, a significant boost

in confidence in future social action on issues important to them. The research extended our understanding of outcomes of intergenerational contact programmes beyond attitudes (confidence in future contact, intergroup felt understanding) and beyond the intergroup context (community social action), as well as identifying potential processes that drive the positive effects of intergenerational contact.

#### 4.1 | Intergroup Felt Understanding

The qualitative analysis provided new insights into the role of 'intergroup felt understanding' as an outcome of and potential process driving intergenerational contact effects. Extensive research shows that feeling understood by others, referred to as felt understanding, is important for building healthy relationships and for well-being (Lun et al. 2008; Oishi et al. 2010, 2013). Intergroup felt understanding considers this at a group level and is defined as the belief that members of an outgroup understand and accept the perspectives of in-group members, including in-group members' beliefs, values, experiences and self-definition/identity (Livingstone 2023). Simply put, it is 'how one's in-group's perspectives are seen in the mind's eye of outgroup members' (Livingstone 2023, 1).

Recent field research has shown how, in the same way that felt understanding is crucial for interpersonal relations, intergroup felt understanding is also a powerful predictor of intergroup relations. In a series of experimental studies with adults, intergroup felt understanding has been shown to be a powerful predictor of intergroup trust and forgiveness, and outgroup action intentions, in a number of intergroup contexts (Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, and Rothers 2020), while feeling misunderstood, on a group level, predicts prejudice (Vázquez et al. 2018). Meanwhile, experimental studies that manipulate the level of intergroup felt understanding show this important predictor has a causal effect on subsequent intergroup trust (Livingstone, Windeatt, et al. 2020).

Livingstone and colleagues emphasised the need for further research to uncover how felt understanding comes about, and how intergroup interactions can be structured to fuel felt understanding, stressing the importance of communication to cultivate felt understanding (Livingstone 2023). Analysis of our qualitative data suggests that the IGP tested here provided opportunities for both younger and older generations to communicate their authentic selves, including their values, experiences and perspectives, which in turn developed both generations' understandings of the other, which were signalled and picked up by both parties. We believe the nature of the intergenerational contact intervention, which focused on high stakes, high conflict, contentious issues selected by younger people, and on which our older and younger generations may expect to disagree, created opportunities for our participants to enhance the other generation's understanding by expressing their views and experiences on this topic, and provided a chance for the other generation to express their understanding of the other group's experiences and perspectives.

The current research is the first to our knowledge to provide evidence for intergroup felt understanding following intergenerational contact, among both younger and older participants, making an important contribution to this promising new line of research. It also has applied implications: many prejudice-reduction interventions focus on breaking down stereotypes, both in their design and evaluation. The present research suggests that generating intergroup felt understanding could be an important catalyst for change, and future prejudice-reduction interventions should incorporate opportunities for the development of intergroup felt understanding. Our interviews revealed further details on aspects of the intergroup interactions and communication that occurred during the intergenerational contact that may promote intergroup understanding and felt understanding. These include opportunities for self-disclosure, as well as opportunities to be heard, and communicated with, which were particularly important for younger and older people, respectively.

#### 4.1.1 | Self-Disclosure

Research has shown that self-disclosure, sharing meaningful information about ourselves with others, plays an important role in building high quality intergroup relationships (Turner et al. 2007). In familial intergenerational relationships, regular contact with a grandparent is positively related to reciprocal self-disclosure, which in turn is associated with a perception

of greater variability across older adults (Harwood et al. 2005). Livingstone (2023) proposes that self-disclosure, and crucially the *recipient's response to self-disclosure* in intergroup interactions, could be an important predictor of intergroup felt understanding. Our research suggests this may be the case: interviewees shared numerous examples where personal information had been shared with the other generation. They emphasised the importance not just of the self-disclosure, but of the responsiveness of their interaction partner to that information. It was their partners' receptiveness to the self-disclosure that was crucial to participants' felt understanding, challenging stereotypes and building better understanding between groups.

#### 4.1.2 | Opportunities to Be Heard

For young people in particular, the fact that they had an opportunity to express views and experiences that were important to them, and that older people *listened to them*, was crucial to the intergenerational contact effect. Interestingly, Livingstone (2023) also proposed that having voice is a pre-requisite to felt understanding: in order for another group to understand your group, you need to be able to express your group's views, identity, perspectives and experiences. Our findings suggest having voice to express one's own views, and feeling heard by the other generation is important for successful intergenerational contact, particularly for younger people. Younger people reported that older people listened to them, which communicated respect. Feeling listened to may have been particularly important for younger people who are of relatively low status within society (Bruneau and Saxe 2012). As a result of listening, they believed older people gained a better understanding of their lives, which was verified through interviews with older people.

Future research should further examine the importance of both having voice, and feeling heard, for felt understanding and intergenerational contact, including the different ways in which listening behaviour and felt understanding were signalled by older people. Here, research examining interactions at the interpersonal level may be useful in understanding both why feeling heard is important and how this can manifest within intergroup contexts. For example, Roos et al. (2023) attempt to elucidate the experience of feeling heard at the interpersonal level. They propose that feeling heard consists of the following components: having voice, receiving attention, empathy and respect, and at a collective level, sharing common ground. Itzchakov et al. (2021) have conducted extensive research on the characteristics and positive effects of high-quality listening and partner responsiveness. This research emphasises the importance of listening behaviour for subsequent relations, and in their recent theoretical paper outline the relationship between high-quality listening (which involves paying attention, comprehending what the speaker is saying and listening with a non-judgemental position), perceived partner responsiveness and relationship building (Itzchakov et al. 2021).

#### 4.1.3 | Being Communicated With

For older people in particular, it was being *communicated with* that was important in their interactions with younger people.



Older people's biggest concerns coming into the interaction were that young people would not talk with them. This was in part driven by a stereotype of younger people as anti-social delinquents (Christmann and Rogerson 2004). Older people expressed surprise at younger people's willingness to engage with them and appreciated their contributions. Intergroup contact researchers emphasise the importance of meaningful intergroup interactions to optimise attitude change. However, there is scant research on what a meaningful interaction entails, from the perspectives of the groups involved. These findings point to the importance of understanding what constitutes meaningful, high-quality contact and suggest that it may differ for different groups within intergenerational contact and intergroup contact more generally. Further research is needed to better understand this important issue. We suggest two potential avenues. First, age groups may enter the contact encounter to satisfy different motivations. Socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al. 1999) suggests that motivations change across the lifespan, and empirical research identifies that developmental opportunities drive successful contact for younger workers, while older workers are motivated by generativity striving (Henry et al. 2015). Second, from a wider intergroup perspective, contact experiences are likely to vary depending on each partner's position within prior conflict experiences. Shnabel and Nadler's (2008) needs-based model of reconciliation suggests that to restore intergroup harmony, contact should reduce conflict victims' perceived threat to their power and status, whilst conflict perpetrators require a reduction in threats to their morality and social acceptability. Both suggested research approaches provide explanations of why the meaning of high-quality contact may differ within contact partners.

## 4.2 | Confidence in Contact and Perceived Similarity

Quantitative analysis revealed the positive impact of the programme on younger people's 'confidence in contact' with older generations, the first time to our knowledge that this has been examined in the context of intergenerational interactions. Turner and Cameron's (2016) theory proposes that experience of positive intergroup contact generates 'confidence in contact', a state of readiness for positive interactions with a member of another group, whereby children have the required confidence, skills, beliefs, and experience for successful intergroup interactions. To our knowledge, this is the first time confidence in contact has been studied in the context of intergenerational contact. Thus providing novel evidence that for children, confidence in contact not only arises from positive intergroup contact within age groups (e.g., intra-age, interethnic contact) but also from contact across age groups (e.g., intergenerational contact). To further extend understanding, future research should test the generalised effects of intergenerational contact on confidence in future interactions beyond this intergroup context, and examine its impact on confidence in interactions across other lines of difference. Results of the current IGP also suggest further support for the impact of intergenerational contact on perceived similarity, and underlined the importance of providing opportunities to explore similarity via self-disclosure.

## 4.3 | Confidence in Community Social Action

Survey findings suggest this IGP boosted young people's confidence in taking action to improve their local communities, specifically among secondary school pupils. Thus, our quantitative analysis provides support for the more generalised effects of contact beyond intergroup attitudes and behaviours (Meleady et al. 2019, 2020).

Most social psychology research examining intergroup contact and social action has focused on willingness to engage in specific behaviours that promote equality or reduce disadvantage for the outgroup they have come into contact with, and other groups (e.g., Reimer et al. 2017; Çakal et al. 2016). The current research took a different approach, making social action on a local or national issue on which the generations may be expected to hold different views the focus of the interaction itself. Each intergenerational group addressed a social issue in society today, and younger and older people shared their views and experiences around the issue. The programme culminated in the production of a creative piece of work illustrating the issue and possible solutions. The act of creating this piece of work was an act of community social action in itself, as participants sought to educate others and publicise the issue. Alongside this, groups also put together action plans for future steps to address the problem. Survey results suggest the experience of successfully taking social action during intergenerational contact built participants' self-efficacy and motivation for future social action. However, it appears that for secondary school pupils, whose initial social action levels were lower than primary school pupils, the intervention boosted their social action confidence. It should be noted that slightly different wording was used in the surveys for primary and secondary pupils, whereby the primary school pupils were asked about their confidence in making a difference in the world, whereas secondary school pupils were asked about their confidence in making a difference in their local community. Future research should examine the impact of intergenerational contact on confidence in collective action to support the rights of younger and older people, and other specific societal inequalities, and local and national issues.

Together, the qualitative and quantitative data underline the utility of examining 'self-focused' outcomes of intergroup (in this case intergenerational) contact. Most psychological theories of contact, and evaluations of intergroup contact programmes, focus on 'inter-group' outcomes such as stereotypes and prejudice. The current research contributes to our growing understanding of the impact of intergroup contact on confidence and self-efficacy as outcomes of intergroup contact, and further supports Turner and Cameron's (2016) theoretical model by demonstrating the impact of intergroup contact on confidence in contact in a new domain, namely intergenerational contact.

## 4.4 | Limitations

One of the challenges of evaluating pre-existing intergroup contact interventions in the field is that practitioners will often combine multiple elements in their intervention design in order to maximise impact. For researchers, this is problematic as it can make it

difficult to disentangle the effects of the different elements of an intervention (Cameron and Rutland 2016), including the experience of contact and the activity involved in the contact interaction. Unfortunately, it was not possible to include control groups within the design of the IGP, which creates an important limitation to the quantitative element of the research as we cannot be certain that the changes observed in confidence in community social action were because of the intergroup contact element of the IGP or the intervention task (discussing community social actions). However, our hypotheses were based on sound theoretical reasoning and prior research which demonstrated an effect of intergenerational contact on non-intergroup outcomes when compared to same-age contact (Kessler and Staudinger 2007). Future research could use a randomised control trial design, utilising a control group of younger and older people with no intergenerational contact provided and/or conditions where young participants interact with same-age participants. Despite this limitation, the mixed methods approach adopted in our study is useful in providing rich evidence of the impact of the programme.

Our outcomes were measured using single items, which were more manageable for participating schools, but reduced our understanding of the nuances of confidence in contact, perceived similarity, and commitment to future social action. Further research should use more sophisticated measures of these variables, including confidence in interacting with other groups, and commitment to and plans for different forms of social action. Future research should also expand the outcomes and potential processes examined, to include empathy, perspective taking, and other established intergroup outcomes that have received relatively less attention in the context of intergenerational relations, and test these among younger and older participants separately to further examine the potentially distinct processes and conditions for successful intergenerational contact effects identified in our data.

The evaluation also did not gather survey data from older participants. Future research should use surveys to evaluate the impact of the programme among both younger and older participants, on key contact outcomes, including confidence in contact, perceived similarity, and confidence in community social action. This would allow further exploration of whether the effect of the programme is comparable across younger and older participants, as well as identifying unique effects of the contact programme with older people.

The insights provided by our participants into the experience of intergroup contact 'in the moment' provided new understandings of the range of outcomes of intergenerational (and intergroup) contact, as well as highlighting potential processes or mechanisms by which these changes occur. Future quantitative research could further develop this understanding through statistical analysis of the mediational role of felt understanding in intergenerational contact effects, and how the high-conflict social issues were discussed, so as to boost intergenerational attitudes and social action.

## 4.5 | Conclusion

These findings provide new evidence of how the experience of intergenerational dialogue on sensitive issues can generate felt

intergroup understanding, and how participation in a social-action based IGP can influence outcomes beyond intergroup relations.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

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

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> While three specific schools were coded into the data secondary level, analysis of this data revealed no significant main effects or interactions of school (all  $t$ s < 1.72, all  $p$ s > 0.08). Therefore, only comparisons between school settings (primary vs. secondary) were included in the analyses reported for confidence in contact and confidence in social action.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** *casp70157-sup-0001-Supinfo.docx*.