Applying a social justice lens to youth mentoring: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Practice

Key Details

KEY WORDS
Mentoring, Mentorship, Social Justice, Positive Youth Development

POPULATION GROUP
All Youth; Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEMES
Strong, Supportive Friends & Families

RESEARCH ORIGIN
USA

SOURCE
Academic

“Without attention to the principles of social justice across all components of formal mentoring programs, there remains the risk of further marginalizing youth and recreating oppressive structures” (p. 377).

1. What is the research about?

The number of youth mentoring programs has increased during the past several decades, as they are often seen as a good way to improve outcomes for 'disadvantaged' youth. Some argue, however, that mentorship also has the potential to keep up existing inequalities, because mentors often belong to groups who hold power and privilege, while youth mentees often come from marginalized communities. A solution proposed for this concern is taking a social justice approach to mentoring; in this case, social justice means focusing on equal access to resources, trying to even out differences in power, and promoting wellness among people living in marginalized communities. Therefore, the researchers in this study were interested in learning more about how mentor/mentee relationships develop in cases where mentors occupy positions of power, as well as ways of reducing power imbalances within mentor/mentee relationships.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research review took place in the United States.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth mentors, and young people (aged 11-25) in mentoring relationships.

4. How was the research done?

This research is an overview of studies on social justice within youth mentorship programs. The researchers searched through research databases using key terms, including "mentor," "social justice," and "adolescence." Their goal was to find articles that used a social justice perspective. They found over 50 articles that met this criteria and examined them, looking for common themes across articles and gaps in existing research, and making recommendations for next steps – both for researchers and those currently working within the youth mentorship field.

5. What are the key findings?

The researchers organized the relevant articles into one of four categories: mentoring across difference, mentoring and empowerment, mentoring and critical consciousness, and mentoring and social capital.

- **Mentoring Across Difference:** Mentor/mentee pairs who have a shared background or similar traits seem to work best.

- **Mentoring and Empowerment:** Programs should work to change mentors' perspectives from focusing on problems in youth and/or their environments to a strength-based approach, recognizing that all youth have assets and resources to succeed.
- **Mentoring and Critical Consciousness:** Critical consciousness "…involves a fundamental understanding of oppressive social elements, hierarchical structures, and one's place in society" (p. 369). Training and co-learning with mentees can be a tool to increase critical consciousness for mentors.
- **Mentoring and Social Capital:** Mentors who come from more privileged backgrounds may be able to provide youth with greater opportunities for later success, including providing advice about applying to university; this must come after working to develop strong relationships with mentees.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Based on their key findings, the researchers offered recommendations for youth mentor programs with respect to recruitment, screening, and training.

Recruitment

- The language used in recruiting youth mentors can be changed to better reflect a social justice perspective.
- Programs should avoid "recruitment materials [that] imply that the primary task of mentors is to save youth from their risky home environments," instead drawing attention to "youths' strengths and [mentors'] desire to collaborate with youth to affect social change" (p. 372).
- Programs should include youth mentees throughout the recruitment process, both to ensure a better fit with mentors and to empower youth during the process.

Screening

- Beyond preventing cases of physical or sexual abuse, existing screening processes do not do enough to locate potentially harmful mentors (e.g. those with a racial bias or who are unaware of/do not acknowledge their privilege).
- Programs can also schedule check-ins for mentors/mentees with program staff beyond their initial pairing, as well as opportunities for mentor/mentee pairs to interact with one another.

- Often, programs are constantly in need of volunteers, leading to limited screening, but it is important to recognize that the presence of any mentor is not necessarily better than no mentor at all.

Training

- Train mentors to understand marginalization as a systemic issue, and that the goal of mentorship is not to encourage youth to assimilate to dominant White, middle-class norms.
- When youth mentors and mentees do not share the same racial or economic background, this training helps them to be more supportive and empathic.
- There is a need to normalize discussing race and social justice issues for White, middle-class mentors who may be uncomfortable.

Albright, J.N., Hurd, N.M., & Hussain, S.B. (2017). Applying a social justice lens to youth mentoring: A review of the literature and recommendations for practice. American Journal of Community Psychology, 59, 363-381. DOI: 10.1002/ajcp.12143

www.youthrex.com | **@REXforyouth** | **www.exchange.youthrex.com**

An Ontario where shared knowledge is transformed into positive impact for all youth!

YOUTHREX
Research & Evaluation eXchange