

Building Mentoring Relationships with Youth Living in Contexts of Risk and Disadvantage

KEYWORDS

mentoring, focus group, at-risk youth, mentor perceptions, critical mentoring elements, mentor-mentee relationship, youth mentoring

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

Young people living in situations of risk and disadvantage are especially vulnerable to high-risk behaviour such as drug use, violence, unsafe sex, and social or academic failure. Research suggests that long-term mentoring programs can be effective at addressing high-risk behaviour and supporting disadvantaged youth. However, replicating effective mentoring relationships that develop naturally — with a neighbour or relative, for example — is challenging. Replicating formal mentoring programs is also difficult. More research is needed to inform mentoring practice and help mentors build strong relationships with their mentees. The purpose of this study is to identify critical factors for establishing successful mentoring relationships with youth living in contexts of disadvantage. The study also seeks to identify the types of supports that youth need to develop academically and socially. The insights gathered are meant to inform how to best recruit, train, and support mentors in formal youth mentoring programs.

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to answer the following two questions: What are some important factors associated with building successful mentoring relationships? What supports do youth need to develop academically and socially? The study participants included a purposive sample of 12 mentors with formal training in education, counseling, or clergy leadership, and experience in successfully building long-term mentoring relationships with children and adolescents from varied cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Participant insights were collected through two focus group discussions. Interview questions were used as prompts and group discussion was encouraged. The collected data was analyzed via content analysis.

The authors of this study identified the following limitations: a small number of participants from a single geographic location whose opinions and experiences may not be representative of other mentors from different regions or programs. Also, program mentees were not included in the study.

KEY FINDINGS

The study identifies two main factors that help establish successful mentoring relationships with disadvantaged youth: supportive acceptance and consistency. Supportive acceptance refers to the mentor's acceptance of the mentee, regardless of the situation the mentee may be in, and a feeling of genuine interest in their mentees and their lives. Consistency refers to always responding to a mentee in the same way, on an ongoing and long-term basis. Mentors in this study emphasized that it takes a significant time commitment to build a trusting relationship in which the youth can develop. Presence (i.e. being in the moment when interacting with a mentee, remaining focused on the mentee and not distracted) was also identified as crucial to relationship-building.

In addition, two elements were found to be key to helping mentees develop academically and socially: social literacy and future visioning. Social literacy refers to social skills as well as a broader sense of social responsibility. Mentors teach this both explicitly, by volunteering at a food bank, for example, and, implicitly, by modeling it through interactions with the mentee and other adults. Mentors can teach future visioning by helping mentees make positive decisions about, and plan for, their futures. These supports assist with positive development and help mentees become more resilient. Resilience was also identified as a key skill: mentors in this study strongly believe that resilience is a personal skill that can be taught and cultivated through meaningful mentoring.

These four main themes are believed to be interrelated and cyclical: supportive acceptance and consistency help the mentees build social literacy and future visioning. However, the study does not explore the exact nature of how these concepts interrelate.

WHY THIS MATTERS

By highlighting supportive acceptance and consistency, as well as presence and genuine interest, this study provides valuable conceptual information on how to develop quality mentor-youth relationships. The study also suggests that mentors should prioritize working with mentees on social literacy and future visioning skills in order to maximize their mentees' positive development. While the study does not recommend any practical steps for mentors, the clear analysis of key concepts crucial to effective mentoring relationships provides helpful guidance to inform mentoring practice.

The insights in this study can help program managers implement more effective mentor selection, training, and ongoing support processes. The study

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This study asked mentors to identify the most important components of good mentor-youth relationships, and the kind of support mentees need most from their mentors in order to develop academically and socially. Focus groups revealed that supportive acceptance and consistency are key, and that they help mentees develop social literacy and future visioning skills.

also stresses the importance of preparing mentors for handling potential mentee risk factors, such as limited social literacy skills, which can make relationship-building more challenging. Overall, this research can be used to strengthen the quality of mentoring programs, which will lead to better outcomes for mentees.

“...it is through the development of a supportive trusting relationship that youth can be taught social skills and develop appropriate visions for their futures, which may then strengthen their relationships.”

Smith, Newman-Thomas,
& Stormont, 2015

RECAP

According to mentors, supportive acceptance and long-term consistent support are the most important ingredients for building strong relationships with mentees. Teaching social literacy and future visioning skills should also be prioritized to ensure positive academic and social development.

APA CITATION

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