



The pursuit of social capital among adolescent high school aged girls: The role of formal mentor-mentee relationships

1. What is the research about?

This research explores how **social capital** – the social resources a person has access to, such as relationships, communities, and networks – develops in mentor-mentee relationships. Research shows that social capital can support the **upward social mobility** of youth. Having social capital has also been linked to more successful transitions from secondary school to work and higher education.

This study examines youth's experiences of social capital in the context of a mentorship program that connects professional women with high school-aged girls facing barriers to accessing post-secondary education and employment.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in a lower socioeconomic status neighbourhood in Toronto, Ontario.

3. Who is this research about?

This study is about high school-aged girls. Participants were in Grade 11 or 12, 16- or 17-years-old, and belonged to an ethno-racial or ethno-cultural minority.

4. How was the research done?

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews over the phone and in person. Of the 30 girls enrolled in the program, 15 agreed to participate. Respondents were asked to describe their reasons for taking part in the mentorship program, and any perceived benefits. They were each compensated with a \$10 gift card to a clothing store.

The limitations of the study include its small sample size and the use of qualitative methods. The researchers note that the findings of the study should not be taken as generalizable claims about youth's experiences of social capital.

“While previous research on social capital has emphasized the passive role of youth in acquiring social capital, these respondents clearly demonstrate their active participation in accessing social capital and its subsequent mobilization” (p. 280).

5. What are the key findings?

This study suggests that some youth are actively engaged in accessing and mobilizing social capital through mentor-mentee relationships.

a) Youth actively pursued access to social capital.

Respondents discussed their perceived lack of social capital as a reason for participating in the mentorship program. They viewed school resources as limited and framed the search for social capital as an investment in their own upward social mobility. The mentorship program was seen as a unique opportunity to connect with professionals they would otherwise not have met.

b) Youth consciously mobilized their newly-acquired social capital.

Mentees recognized their mentors as a resource and came to regard them as “not only trusted advisors, but people they could call on for help” (p. 279). They used their newly-acquired social capital to pursue education and employment, as well as to expand their social networks. Mentors provided information, advice, and social contacts.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study highlights the role of community-based actors in promoting access to social capital for youth in marginalized communities. The authors note that **“the importance of mentors as providers of social capital cannot be ignored”** (p. 281). The findings of this study suggest that early interventions can harness young people's upwardly mobile aspirations – their “ambition and deliberate goal setting” (p. 281) – to better support transitions from secondary school.



Shier, M. L., Gouthro, S., & de Goias, R. (2018).

The pursuit of social capital among adolescent high school aged girls: The role of formal mentor-mentee relationships. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 93, 276-282.