Evidence Brief

Seven Considerations & Recommendations for Mentoring Programs Serving Black Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, and searched online databases using the following key terms: "Black youth," "group mentoring," "social justice mentoring," and "Afrocentric mentoring."

Part One: Setting the Context

There is limited research that explores the efficacy of alternative mentoring program models for Black youth (Albright et al., 2017; Sánchez, 2016; Washington et al., 2014). Regardless, there are a number of promising emergent program models that have shown improvements in outcomes for Black youth. For example, group mentoring programs "that develop a sense of unity, brotherhood, caring, and trust among program members may be particularly helpful to Black male youth" (Sánchez, 2016, p. 15). A review of promising and successful mentoring approaches for Black youth notes that most of the programs are premised on structured group activities (Jarjoura, 2013). Additionally, research suggests that group mentoring models align more closely with the values and aims of Afrocentric approaches to community and youth development, which can promote positive youth outcomes relating to positive racial and ethnic identity development and critical consciousness-raising (Albright et al., 2017; Sánchez, 2016; Washington et al., 2014).

There has also been a growing call for transformative programmatic shifts in the ways that mentoring programs approach Black and other racialized youth. Increasingly, the values and practices of traditional one-to-one mentoring models are causing serious concern in research and in racialized communities. A proposal for social justice-informed mentoring models articulates **four key concerns** (Albright et al., 2017):

1. Typical mentoring programs are premised on exposing racialized 'disadvantaged' 'at-risk' youth to white, middle-class mentors to offset their 'risks' and promote upward mobility and pro-social behaviour;

2. The language and practices of typical models tend to promote a deficit-based narrative that positions the goal of mentorship as 'fixing' problematic and needy youth – assimilating racialized youth to white, middle-class norms and values to make them more acceptable to dominant society;

3. One-on-one models have an alarming propensity to reproduce inequality, oppressive power hierarchies, and serious psychological harm in their mentoring relationships;

4. The risks of harming youth with these models are disproportionately under-researched and traditional mentoring models are slow to implement changes to mitigate these risks.

A review of the literature on alternative mentoring models for Black youth suggests incorporating **two key features** that move away from the traditional one-to-one mentoring models (Albright et al., 2017; Jarjoura, 2013):

1. Successful and promising mentoring models for Black youth are typically **group mentoring models**; and

2. Black youth engaged in programs that **exclusively use Black mentors** experience positive outcomes (which are not as easily achieved in models that do not prioritize demographically-matched mentoring relationships), such as:
    a. improved racial and ethnic identity development;
    b. improved motivation and notions of future possibilities; and
    c. positive coping strategies for responding to and processing traumatic experiences of racism, exposure to violence, discrimination, and oppressive social structures.

Part Two: Summary of Evidence
Seven Considerations & Recommendations

1. Consider the benefits of demographically-matched mentoring.
While researchers widely agree about the overall benefit of positive and supportive mentoring relationships, there is less agreement about the effects of race, ethnicity, and diversity in youth mentoring relationships (Liang & West, 2006). While some researchers argue that demographic matches are beneficial, others argue that non-demographic matches can be just as effective, as long as mentors are culturally sensitive and aware of the positionality of the youth (Ontario Mentoring Coalition, 2016).

Despite this disagreement, the research shows that there are a number of critical benefits to demographically-matched mentoring relationships. It is not only, or simply, that mentors with similar lived experiences of racialization may be more relatable to racialized youth. More importantly, this mutual identification is also coupled with positive notions of future possibilities for youth. A mentor who shares experiences of racial or ethnic oppression, as well as strategies for coping with and overcoming these barriers, shares in the strengths and assets of being a racialized

individual, and can promote positive racial/ethnic identity development. A mentor who looks like the young person – who demonstrates that success is possible despite unequal opportunities, racial violence, and oppression – has the ability to empower Black youth and promote ethnic pride in ways that cannot be achieved without that shared lived experience (Albright et al., 2017; Jarjoura, 2013). In the wake of overwhelmingly negative images of the Black community in every conceivable form of media, it is vital that counter images of what is possible for Black youth are part and parcel of mentoring programs that serve Black youth (Albright et al., 2017).

Not only are the potential ***benefits*** of the relationship important to consider and measure, but the potential ***risks of harm*** are similarly important to consider: "At their core, mentoring programs often rely on exposure to successful, middle-class adult volunteers... The prototypical mentor is a white, middle-class adult and the prototypical protégée is an economically disadvantaged youth of color... there is a need for critical reflection on the ways in which youth mentoring interventions may serve to reproduce rather than reduce inequality" (Albright et al., 2017, p. 362-363). Given that traditional mentoring models are inherently hierarchical, the necessity to reflect on the potential for reproducing inequitable relationships is ever more serious.

Regardless of racial or ethnic identity, a mentor's level of ***ethnocultural empathy*** – "empathy toward people of racial/ethnic backgrounds different from one's own" (Albright et al., 2017, p. 367) – is fundamental to a positive mentoring experience. There are, however, key considerations and benefits that support the necessity for demographically-matched mentoring relationships (Albright et al., 2017; Ontario Mentoring Coalition, 2016; Sanchez, 2016; Washington et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2016). These considerations and benefits, such as those mentioned above, are arguably so important to a racialized young person's positive development that to overlook them in mentor recruiting, training, program design, and program evaluation could be a significant disservice to racialized youth receiving mentorship in these programs.

2. Emphasize the strengths, assets, and excellence of the Black community.
Organizations can better serve Black youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. Youth organizations can also engage with Black youth in a more humanizing, empowering way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the "deficit is within a society and a school system that has failed Black youth" (Baldridge, 2014, p. 467). Train mentors to integrate a strength-based approach into their mentoring relationships. Develop an organizational culture in which staff recognize young people's strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, and agency.

A culturally-centered group mentoring model can emphasize the cultural assets and strengths of the Black community (Washington et al., 2014). Afrocentric experiences of and approaches to

community and family are comparatively different from dominant Eurocentric accounts of what community and family should look like. For instance, in traditional Eurocentric theories of human development, great emphasis is put on the parent's direct influence upon a child's healthy psychosocial development. These approaches also privilege more individualized responsibility for social reproduction (the work that it takes to raise and support children, youth, adults, etc.). In many Afrocentric traditions of familial structures and parenting, many adults not biologically-related to the child play significant roles in their psychosocial development. Historically, "mutual aid networks" of unrelated "elders" were central to the reproduction and survival of young African peoples in the wake of colonial violence and enslavement (Washington et al., 2014, p. 650). Echoing throughout time, and as social contexts have changed, this communal network remains a critical part of social reproduction in many Black communities. The particular assets of this communal approach to youth development should be emphasized in mentorship programs targeting Black youth because it is more likely representative of their community and family settings than Eurocentric accounts of community and family strengths/assets (Washington et al., 2014).

The proposal for a culturally-centered group mentoring model describes the approach of "pyramid mentoring" (Washington et al., 2014, p. 651). This approach emphasizes the cultural assets of Afrocentric values and traditions of collectivism and community-based therapeutic healing through group mentoring. Well-trained mentors, called "elders," come together to support Black youth to develop their critical consciousness, educational and vocational skillsets, positive therapeutic responses to racism and oppressive structures, and critical consciousness. Research shows that promoting Afrocentric values in programs targeting Black youth can influence youth attitudes towards drug use and positive responses and healing from trauma, and promote positive youth development (Washington et al., 2014).

3. Inform mentor recruitment and training with principles of social justice.

Successful mentoring programs select volunteers who are oriented toward the values and philosophy of the program, then offer training to strengthen mentors' knowledge and skills. Often, traditional mentorship programs understand effective mentors to be those who show warmth, a sense of humour, and have a foundation in active listening, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and openness (Resiliency Initiatives, 2010). Emerging opinions on what constitutes an 'effective' mentor, however, have become increasingly critical of recruitment standards used in traditional mentoring programs. It is generally accepted that poor-quality mentor relationships can have the adverse effect of harming youth outcomes (Donlan et al., 2017). Mentor programs engage in a host of screening processes (i.e. formal applications and references, in-person interviews, background and criminal record checks, etc.) to avoid characteristics such as abusive, violent or reckless behaviour that could potentially harm the young people they serve. However, anti-Black sentiments and other racial and social biases are not systematically screened for as harmful characteristics that must be avoided. A proposal for social justice-informed youth mentoring argues that the "potential

for mentors to cause psychological harm due to misguided or inappropriate approaches to working with marginalized youth is arguably left unexamined by traditional screening processes" (Albright et al., 2017, p. 372).

This proposal goes on (Albright et al., 2017) to acknowledge that mentors who do not have a substantial understanding of power, privilege, and oppression may be at risk of engaging in practices that could:

a) reproduce hierarchical and oppressive power dynamics in the mentor-youth relationship;

b) promote problematic understandings of personal inadequacy as the cause of inequitable experiences (i.e. the experience of poverty being attributed solely to the individual's inability to 'pull themselves up by the bootstraps' and work harder, rather than considering the implications of historic and contemporary systems of oppression and hyper-exploitation); and

c) at best, contribute to the program's ineffectiveness, and at worse, visit serious psychological harms upon the youth.

Very little research has been focused on this issue. However, a number of new mentoring frameworks have demonstrated that greater alignment with principles of social justice improve youth outcomes. These new approaches also suggest that this programmatic shift is increasingly necessary to mitigate the shortcomings of traditional mentoring programs (Albright et al., 2017, p. 373-374):

a) ***Putting youth "in context"***
This refers to comprehensive training for mentors on the systemic nature of marginalization, oppression, and privilege, which cannot be addressed by encouraging racialized youth to assimilate to white, middle-class norms.

b) ***Cultural competency training***
"Critical mentoring" is a framework that aims to improve mentoring practices through social justice-informed training, including education in social justice concepts, critical consciousness, critical race theory, cultural competence, and intersectionality.

c) ***Collaborative learning***
This refers to encouraging co-learning opportunities for mentors and youth through social justice-oriented activities as a way to prevent or lessen hierarchical relationship dynamics.

Programs should evaluate for social justice outcomes, such as psychological and intrapersonal empowerment, critical consciousness-raising, and positive racial and ethnic identity development (Albright et al., 2017, p. 374).

4. Develop critical consciousness in Black youth and mentors.

Many Black youth want to talk about the issues affecting their lives, but schools and educators may shy away from, or shut down, conversations about race/ethnicity (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013). Similarly, white, middle-class mentors may avoid talking about oppressive racial and socioeconomic experiences. Mentoring programs can encourage critical and empowering discussions about privilege, power, and oppression by normalizing that discomfort and preparing mentors with the skills needed to engage and encourage these discussions. First, mentor recruitment procedures must be rooted in principles of social justice to screen out individuals with harmful biases. Further, programs must also provide mentors with the tools needed to engage in informed, genuine, and empathetic discussions with youth. Programs are encouraged to develop critical consciousness among both youth and mentors (Albright et al., 2017).

Critical consciousness involves “a fundamental understanding of oppressive social elements, hierarchical structures, and one’s place in society, and it is developed through education, analysis of personal experience, and critical dialogue” (Albright et al., 2017, p. 369). It further involves “the ability to perceive and interrogate the various forms of oppression that shape one's life, and to take collective action against the status quo” (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013, p. 1701).

Agencies can promote this by integrating social justice-oriented activities, discussions, and training into the foundations of their mentoring program. In so doing, programs can create opportunities for youth and mentors to partner together to further expand their understandings of the ways in which social structures privilege and oppress particular communities, and the ways in which communities collectively resist inequities in transformative ways (Albright et al., 2017). Research shows that co-learning and open dialogues not only support growth in critical consciousness, but they also promote closeness and empathy between youth and mentors, improving the quality of their relationship and youth outcomes (Albright et al., 2017).

5. Inspire hope by emphasizing Black youth’s agency, resilience, and potential.

Research shows that Black youth can benefit from critical consciousness, but talking about systems of oppression can also leave youth feeling disempowered. Some research shows, for example, that talking excessively about anti-Black racism can cause Black youth to want to distance themselves from identifying as Black. While youth programs should create space for Black youth to talk about their experiences, these messages “must be balanced by a strong emphasis on agency, empowerment, and the overcoming of obstacles” (Briggs, 2018, p. 547).

Mentoring programs should offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience. Youth programs can inspire hope by connecting youth to Black role models who have overcome adversity (Jarjoura, 2013). Research suggests that opportunities for Black youth and Black role models/mentors to share previous and present challenges, and healthy coping responses to experiences of overt and covert oppression, violence, and racism, can promote positive youth development and critical consciousness-raising. Research also shows that 'structured therapeutic recreation time' – such as African drumming, martial arts, computer games, etc. – with Black role model mentors promotes senses of self-worth and community connectedness, empowerment, and positive peer interactions (Washington et al., 2014). Group mentoring with Black role models/mentors can support Black youth with "processing feelings related to frustration, pain, fear, stigmatization" and other feelings related to the experiences of being a Black young person (Washington et al., 2014, p. 652). When these programs emphasize collective healing, as an Afrocentric practice, this can help to counter feelings of disempowerment.

6. Expose youth to academic and vocational opportunities in their communities.

Mentoring programs should connect Black youth with both vocational (e.g. trades, employment training) and academic opportunities after high school. It is well-documented that Black youth are disproportionately 'streamed' away from pursuing higher education within the mainstream school system. Mentoring programs can address this by connecting youth with Black mentors who have pursued college or university. At the same time, not all Black youth are interested in or able to pursue college or university. A study of second-generation Caribbean Black youth navigating education and employment in Toronto (Briggs, 2018) argues that organizations should offer mentoring programs that "address the issues of racism on daily basis while providing tools and networks to be prepared for the job market" (Briggs, 2018, p. 547) by connecting youth with community organizations and post-secondary training. This study also suggests that Black youth "who are not academically inclined require access to jobs that offer stability, self-esteem, and a living wage" (Briggs, 2018, p. 547). This is where group mentoring models are especially effective in connecting youth to pre-existing (human and material) resources within their own communities.

This approach not only supports an assets-based model, but also counters problematic narratives that suggest that racialized youth must be saved by white, middle-class norms and mentors – narratives that are commonly promoted in traditional mentor recruiting and training materials (Albright et al., 2017). One critique of anti-Black sentiments in mentoring models highlights the problematic rationale that informs traditional mentoring models, which use language in their program materials that imply that the goal of mentoring is to 'make over' Black youth so that they are more acceptable to society (Weiston-Serdan & Daneshzadeh, 2016). This type of mentoring "doesn't critically acknowledge context, doesn't speak to negative racialized experiences, and doesn't center or value the beauty of Black existence… as a result, [it] justifies the harm done to [youth] by actions fueled by anti-Blackness. This 'un-othering' devalues the spectacular beauty of

the cultural currency these young people possess: their Blackness" (Weiston-Serdan & Daneshzadeh, 2016).

Connecting Black youth to the resources and networks within their communities should be a vital characteristic of mentoring programs in order to counter problematic deficit-based assumptions about the purpose of mentoring. Furthermore, research indicates that that this encourages youth to feel more comfortable with developing relationships with adults in their communities. Given that mentoring programs are typically temporary supports for youth, this approach enables youth to access educational and vocational supports that may endure beyond their involvement in the mentor program (Albright et al., 2017).

7. Incorporate continuous training, monitoring, and support systems for Black mentors.
In addition to the training recommendations mentioned above, mentoring programs that employ Black mentors have additional considerations to keep in mind. The experience of 'over-identification' has been documented, whereby a racialized mentor with shared lived experience of racism and other oppressive dynamics goes through a kind of re-trauma when working with youth (Garraway & Pistrang, 2010). It is critically important to continuously support and prepare mentors for the kinds of intense emotions that may accompany the memories and experiences that they share with youth. This is especially necessary when the traumatic experiences (of racism, discrimination, etc.) are those that the mentor still currently navigates (Albright et al., 2017; Garraway & Pistrang, 2010).

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