



Expanding the reach of youth mentoring: Partnering with youth for personal growth and social change



Belle Liang^{a,*}, Renée Spencer^{b,1}, Jennifer West^a, Nancy Rappaport^{c,2}

^a Department of Counseling and Developmental Psychology, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Avenue, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA

^b School of Social Work, Boston University, 264 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215, USA

^c Department of Psychiatry, Cambridge Hospital, 1493 Cambridge Street Cambridge, MA 02139, USA

A B S T R A C T

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The goals of youth mentoring have broadened from redressing youth problems to promoting positive youth development. Yet, many of the principles associated with contemporary conceptualizations of development found in the positive youth development (PYD) and community psychology (CP) literature have yet to be fully integrated into mentoring research and practice. These approaches place greater emphasis on youth as assets to their communities and the promotion of positive development through the cultivation of these assets, often by fostering collaborative partnerships between youth and adults to effect social change. In this paper, we examine how bringing these systemic, asset-oriented approaches more fully to bear on the youth mentoring process creates opportunities that may both extend the reach and deepen the impact of youth mentoring through the promotion of community, social, and individual change.

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Mentoring is a flexible approach to youth development in which youth often identified as being “at-risk” for poor outcomes (e.g., low income, living in single-parent homes) are paired with unrelated adult volunteers in the hope that a caring and supportive relationship will develop that serves to mitigate these risk conditions. Mentoring is being effectively delivered in a variety of settings (e.g., in communities, schools) with both children and adolescents and has indeed been found to promote gains in emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, including among higher risk youth (Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). The magnitude of the benefits of mentoring, however, is modest and remains virtually unchanged over the last decade even as our understanding of the determinants of higher-quality mentoring relationships has grown considerably (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).

One factor contributing to the somewhat limited impact of mentoring may be the tendency among mentoring program practitioners and researchers to focus most intently on the mentor–youth dyad and to pay less attention to the social ecologies (e.g., families, youth organizations, and neighborhood communities) of the youth and the role that these may play in the mentoring process (for recent exceptions, see Sánchez, Esparza, Berardi, & Pryce, 2011; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, &

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 617 552 4079.

E-mail addresses: liangbe@bc.edu (B. Liang), rspenc@bu.edu (R. Spencer), westje@bc.edu (J. West), nrapaport@nancyrapaport.com (N. Rappaport).

¹ Tel.: +617 353 4611.

² Tel.: +617 575 5900.

Lewis, 2011). Further, while recognition that attending to “risk” alone is too narrow a focus is increasing, mentoring as currently practiced by many programs has yet to fully capitalize on youths’ strengths.

In this paper, we consider how applying principles from positive youth development (PYD) and community psychology (CP) literature to youth mentoring research and practice could serve to both extend the reach and deepen the impact of youth mentoring programs. We begin by identifying PYD as an approach to adolescent development that “focuses on each and every child’s unique talents, strengths, interests and future potential” (Damon, 2004, p. 13), and CP as a field that emphasizes systemic and empowerment-focused interventions (Trickett, 1996). We then detail how the application of these key principles at the heart of PYD and CP can be enlisted to foster individual and community empowerment and change through youth mentoring. Integrating these perspectives can broaden the mission of mentoring to incorporate more systemic change by leveraging youths’ strengths and enabling youth to act as social change agents (Lerner, 2004; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005).

Positive youth development: from preventing problems to realizing potential

Many youth programs, including mentoring programs, are beginning to adopt a PYD approach (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). In contrast to the early deficit oriented theories of adolescent development (e.g., Freud, 1969; Hall, 1904) that have previously informed many programs for youth, PYD focuses on identifying and building on the existing strengths of vulnerable youth and providing them with the additional support and tools needed to achieve their potentials. Youth are seen as “naturally competent” and programs are charged with preparing youth for full engagement in civil society (Damon, 2004).

PYD rejects earlier conceptualizations of youth as “fundamentally flawed” and recognizes that even the most disadvantaged youths have resiliencies to call upon, such as the capacity to change their behavior, develop new cognitive and behavioral skills, cultivate different interests, and establish new social relationships (Lerner, 2004). Strategies for harnessing strengths include targeting universal resiliencies in young people, as well as those that are unique to particular youths and their developmental contexts. Young people stand the greatest chance of leveraging their personal resources when these personal strengths are aligned with strengths in their environment (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). That is, when environmental strengths, termed “developmental assets” (Benson et al., 2006), are a good fit with young people’s strengths, their strengths and developmental assets are mutually enhanced (Lerner, 2004).

Community psychology: from individual to systemic change

Similar to PYD theorists, community psychologists would argue that although alleviating individual suffering and promoting individual strengths are worthy goals, these endeavors are insufficient in and of themselves (Goodman et al., 2004). Psychological problems are understood to be closely tied to systemic issues, such as the nature and availability of social support, employment status, housing conditions, history of discrimination, and overall personal and political power. Therefore, promoting the positive development of youth requires also promoting social justice, as positive development may not be possible for some individuals in the absence of justice (Prillentensky, 1999).

Integrating PYD and CP principles into youth mentoring

Both PYD and CP theorists recognize the need for youths to fulfill a purpose beyond individual well-being and success. They posit that youths can benefit from being empowered to play significant roles in social change (Damon, 2008). The PYD field has come to appreciate that civic engagement may even be critical to consolidating identity in adolescence (Flanagan, 2004). Youth organizing has, arguably, evolved from PYD and Community Youth Development perspectives (Listen, Inc., 2000). Although PYD principles are often used to inform youth mentoring efforts, inclusion of social activism in youth mentoring is much less common. Some critics of mentoring have even argued that it is simply not possible to effect social change through mentoring. Gary Walker, president emeritus of Public/Private Ventures, describes how individual mentoring has been seen by some as diversionary, even antithetical to social change (Walker, 2007), in much the same way that individual psychotherapy has been considered to be antithetical to social change by many community psychologists (Goodman et al., 2004). Walker (2007) summarizes the critique this way:

... at its core, mentoring is a charitable act, a kindness to a stranger, improvement in the life of people one at a time – whereas what we need is social change, where change comes to larger groups of individuals all at once and, at the same time, positions future generations better. Mentoring as social policy, under this critique, is diversionary at best, reactionary at worst. Even if it is effective and does build confidence in social policy, it remains diversionary and/or reactionary because what it builds confidence in is the capacity of individuals to help individuals; it blunts the fundamental need for broader social change. (p. 15)

Others, however, have argued that youth mentoring is actually quite well-suited for supporting youth engagement in community organizing and similar social change endeavors due to its emphasis on personal interaction and mutual trust, which form the foundation of effective community partnerships (Hartley, 2004). Youth-led community organizing and other youth-led social change interventions typically rely on apprenticeship and advisement relationships, as they require skills rarely taught in formal education. Indeed, such relationships can empower individuals to take action as they increase a sense

of self-worth, vitality, and validation; a knowledge of self and others; and a desire for further connection (Jordan, 1997). Thus, we contend that good mentoring and good youth-led community organizing can go hand in hand.

Partnering with youth for personal growth and social change through mentoring

PYD (Lerner, 2004) and CP (Trickett, 1984) scholars argue that social context is not an abstract set of disembodied structures. Youth comprise a social context and can ideally help shape policies, cultural practices, and social norms. Thus, instead of differentiating individual needs and interests from the highly conceptual “greater good,” mentoring individual youth in a way that takes into account their social conditions – and youths’ potential for taking up the charge to improve them – can be an effective approach to redressing social ills. Just as youth are reliant on social change for true health and positive development, social change can be effected by purpose-seeking youth as they fulfill their need to make a contribution to the world beyond the self (Damon, 2008).

Youth–adult partnership (Y–AP) is an innovative strategy that combines the goals of PYD and CP. Y–APs simultaneously promote positive youth development and build communities through a reciprocal relationship between youth and adults who engage in “leading and learning” as partners in community activism (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O’Connor, 2005, p. 5). More specifically, in the field of youth development, the term “youth–adult partnership” refers to a relationship in which both youth and adults learn from one another, contribute to decision-making, and act together to promote change in programs and communities (Jones & Perkins, 2005; Mitra, Sanders, & Perkins, 2010). Y–APs also aim to enhance youths’ sense of community and empower youth to take action in their own development and social context (Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). In the following sections, we will highlight Y–AP model principles and processes that can be applied to extend the goals of mentoring to include engaging youths in partnerships that create positive change on individual, community, and policy levels. Indeed, scholars have indicated that young people can solve community problems if empowered through participation (Flanagan & Faison, 2001).

The obvious challenge is translating a theoretical understanding of this strength-oriented, social justice mission into practice. In general, we are suggesting a shift in the mentoring field, from a “therapeutic” approach in which individual youth are the targets of the intervention to a more socially transformative approach wherein mentors and youth forge collaborative partnerships that promote positive youth development at individual *and* societal levels. Such an approach would explicitly strive to structure mentoring programs in ways that address the sources of social problems. Moreover, this approach would further enhance the development of youth by empowering them as social justice agents, building on their capacity to identify, analyze, and act on social justice issues relevant to young people.

Mentoring relationships, like the kinds of partnerships described in the Y–AP literature, can encourage youths and adults to work together to bolster critical consciousness and promote social justice behaviors. Thus, lessons learned from Y–AP programs can be used to guide mentors and mentoring programs in fostering such a social justice approach. In the following section, we first identify principles from the Y–AP literature that may be used to create the conditions for existing mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, to adopt a social justice oriented approach. We then will outline five themes from this same literature that help to define the roles and foci of social justice oriented mentoring relationships.

Implementing a social justice oriented approach to mentoring program practices

Although the idea of Y–APs has a relatively long-standing history, incorporating its principles into traditional mentoring programs may be considered an innovation. Conceptualizing adult–youth mentoring relationships as partnerships in the spirit of Y–APs requires some shifts in roles traditionally played by adult mentors, and thus may at first seem to be at odds with mentoring relationships as they are often currently constructed. Fully incorporating a social justice oriented or Y–AP approach into youth mentoring relationships would require programmatic changes in many traditional mentoring programs. The Y–AP literature converges on several principles that are critical to the success of social justice oriented mentoring relationships. These principles include: 1) clarifying purpose; 2) building program infrastructure to fully engage youth and mentors in Y–APs; and 3) preparing adults to effectively engage in partnerships with youth (Camino, 2000; Ginwright, 2005; Libby, Rosen, & Sedonen, 2005; Mitra, 2009; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005).

Clarifying purpose

Successful adoption of innovative approaches in existing programs requires collective “buy-in.” Literature on what is required for programs to buy-in to Y–AP approaches has shown that the organizational community must understand the purpose behind the idea and transform it into meaningful and sustainable practice (Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). This requires a communication process that has two primary goals: 1) passing along information, and 2) achieving consensus and buy-in. Thus, the communication process would not simply entail a unilateral handing down of instructions and new policies regarding the innovation, but in-person meetings in which mentor program directors meet with individual mentor staff and mentors or the group as a whole to provide them opportunities to raise questions, doubts, and concerns, and have these addressed to their satisfaction. Through such dialog, the purpose of an innovation becomes clear and meaningful (Ginwright, 2005; Gladwell, 2002; Zeldin, Larson, & Camino, 2005).

In the absence of a clear and meaningful buy-in process, implementation may be stalled. For example, in their observations of five youth organizations, Zeldin and Camino (1999) found that when the purpose of “youth leadership” was ambiguous during the initiation phases of program planning, staff had trouble agreeing on adult and youth roles, and program planning suffered. On the other hand, when staff made the effort to discuss their differences and acquire a better sense of shared purpose, they were able to achieve higher-quality implementation in the long-term. Thus, while an individual may initiate an innovative idea, it takes the organization’s community to agree on its purpose if it is to be sustainable. A case study by Hefner (1988) on Youth Communication, Inc. – a newspaper created for youth by youth – points to the ways in which the defined purpose of an organization can impact its members’ ability to effectively work together and understand their respective roles. This organization originally defined its purpose as promoting creativity and media awareness among participating youth, which left adult counterparts feeling hesitant to share their input as they did not want to interfere in the “youth-directed” project. When the purpose was redefined as serving the needs of New York teens, adult organizers bought into this broader purpose and were subsequently more comfortable developing an infrastructure that allowed them to better support the youth contributors (Hefner, 1988).

Building infrastructure

The community must also problem-solve together about the logistics of how to integrate Y-APs into existing program-ming. This would include discussions of how the new practices and structures will be aligned with the existing organizational system. Many youth mentoring programs and Y-AP programs have some shared goals and purposes, yet these programs can also hold some different assumptions, and ultimately require different organizational structures and roles for adults and youths. In order to sustain Y-APs in a long-term way, youth mentoring programs need to establish an effective infrastructure for such partnerships. For example, Zeldin et al. (2005) describe how the Youth Leadership Institute found that their organization functioned best when there were a variety of leadership roles available for youth at all levels throughout the organization. Providing a range of roles both enabled the organization to scaffold youth as they progressed to increasingly more challenging roles and ensured that there would always be “qualified” youth to fill these roles. As time went on, these new roles were incorporated into the organizational infrastructure and policy. Moreover, the Youth Leadership Institute regularly involved youth in adult training sessions so that they these young members could influence perspectives on youth and help transform assumptions about how to “help” youth (Libby et al., 2005).

Mentoring programs that already endorse and promote Y-AP practices such as those described above may only need to formalize their existing “best practices” by setting policy. Other mentoring programs may need to make changes to the existing infrastructure that lead to new roles for youth. For example, a common and effective strategy for establishing the practice of Y-APs in youth organizations is to “shock the system” by giving youth voting rights on the organizational board of directors – an intervention that engages youth in decision-making immediately (Zeldin et al., 2005). Indeed, the National 4-H Council went so far as to mandate that administrative, programmatic, and fiscal departments all include youth in defined and structured roles to assist in organizational deliberations and decision-making.

Preparing adults

Research suggests that even the adult mentors most committed to youth participation need targeted technical training to be successful (Mitra et al., 2010; Scheve, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2005). Y-AP researchers have suggested that training should focus on what roles adults could and should play in fostering youth leadership and participation, and how to create a youth inclusive infrastructure (Mitra et al., 2010; Scheve, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2005). In particular, programs may do well to train adult mentors in a method for fostering youth participation called instrumental scaffolding, in which adults engage youth by providing them with cues, suggestions, role-modeling, or clarifications that help their mentees zero in on the critical elements necessary for solving a problem (Larson, 2006).

Besides this content-based training, programs must provide adult mentors with experiential learning opportunities that progress from smaller scale to larger scale exercises, so that they can gain the necessary confidence and skill for implementing Y-APs (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). In the initial stages, for example, staff might provide structured experiences in the form of ice-breakers or small group problem solving activities during collaborative meetings with youth. The goal of these experiential exercises would be to build some small wins that develop a sense of mastery among adult mentors. As trust and confidence builds, staff may reduce their level of coaching and engage adult mentors in working more independently with youth on a committee or community project. Until adult mentors personally experience successfully engaging in a Y-AP, even the best content-based training may not motivate them to implement Y-APs. As a complement to providing adult mentors with personal experience, staff may role-model behaviors such as engaging youth as partners in committee work, organizational meetings, and trainings. In particular, staff would take the opportunity in these contexts to demonstrate best practices by seating youth at the table, asking them for their opinions, and honoring their perspectives and contributions.

Engaging youth in social justice oriented mentoring relationships

In addition to the foundational program practices described above, the Y-AP literature offers insight into some specific ways to empower youth to become social justice agents through mentoring. Many forms of youth participation and activism

delineated in the Y-AP literature, such as community service activities providing aid to needy individuals, advising adult decision-makers in the communities, service learning, and engagement in local, state, and national organizations, depend upon the active presence and partnership of adult advocates or mentors (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Stoneman, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Examination of the literature on Y-APs and youth activism offers a model for how mentors might best partner with youth using a strength-based approach. More specifically, we identified five elements in the Y-AP and CP literature more broadly that can be applied within a social justice oriented approach to youth mentoring to promote positive youth development: 1) sharing power, 2) giving voice, 3) mutual role-modeling, 4) learning by collaborative doing, and 5) addressing societal barriers. In the next sections, we delineate how these principles or practices may be applied to mentoring work.

Sharing power

In a review of research, Watts and Flanagan (2007) demonstrated that the “role” young people have in a project determines its impact on them and, to some degree, the success of the project. Youth governance is different from the kind of youth participation typically encouraged by managers of youth-serving organizations (Stoneman, 2002). A sense of agency, true responsibility, and an empowering role are consistently found to be keys in generating youth interest and maintaining their commitment to the work. Moreover, when the goal of mentoring is to empower youth to collaborate fully with their adult partners in endeavors that may benefit youth and their communities, youth views and youth agency must be taken seriously. Indeed, the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child recognized that adults cannot fully represent youth needs and concerns (Landsdown, 2001) and positive outcomes for individuals and mentor programs can result from a more democratic, non-hierarchical approach. For young people, especially underprivileged youth, such an approach provides an opportunity to experience the respect and acknowledgment of adults (Diversi & Mecham, 2005); and such validation may be especially meaningful to youth because adults typically hold positions of higher status over them. Furthermore, sharing power ensures that program goals will remain relevant to the real interests and experiences of the youth participants (Libby et al., 2005). Translating the notion of shared power into social justice oriented mentoring suggests that mentors (as well as researchers and policy makers in the mentoring field) must redefine their roles and goals. In keeping with CP principles, mentors and mentees should work collaboratively, rather than hierarchically, while amplifying the role and agency of mentees. In a qualitative study that queried adolescents about what they wanted in their mentoring relationships, older adolescents expressed a growing need for a balance in autonomy and connection with their mentors (Liang, Brogan, Spencer, & Corral, 2007). That is, mentees revealed a simultaneous wish to make their own decisions, and wish for mentors to approve of and validate their choices. Similarly, Camino and Zeldin (2002) found that youth desired support from their mentors in the form of dialog, coaching, and providing connections to sources of institutional, community, and political power (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

Community psychologists have long called for practitioners to go beyond an awareness of the inherent power imbalances that exist when working with individuals from underprivileged populations (Helms & Cook, 1999), toward an active effort to level the playing field (Ivey, D’Andrea, Bradford, & Simek-Morgan, 2002). In mentoring relationships, power differentials inherent in the ages and roles of adults and youth can widen when there are also differences in class and cultural backgrounds (Rhodes, Liang, & Spencer, 2009). Mentors may not be aware of the social inequities driving these differentials or how these can play out in relationships (Fisher, 1997). Mentors may express beliefs or opinions that are at odds with those of their mentees, creating conflict for the young person.

The playing field, however, may be leveled through programs’ efforts to recruit mentors with backgrounds more similar to the youth being served (Liang & Grossman, 2007). Because this is not always possible, it is especially important that mentors strive to raise their awareness of power dynamics in cross-age and cross-cultural relationships, refrain from political or religious proselytizing, and seek consultation to negotiate power differentials in the relationship effectively (Rhodes et al., 2009). Training directed toward helping mentors identify their culture- and class-based privileges and expand their cultural knowledge, can be critical to raising mentors’ awareness of insidious power imbalances (Spencer, 2007; Sue & Sue, 2003). Indeed, Camino (2000) noted that the first step working with youth as partners toward social change would be for adults to critically examine their own assumptions, such as their perspectives about youth, the role of power and privilege in their lives, and their own roles in promoting positive youth development and civic engagement.

Furthermore, the literature on intergroup dialogs highlights the importance of learning how to comfortably engage youth in intentional dialogs around power, privilege, and the need for social change. Sorensen et al. suggest a critical-dialogic process model to help structure such conversations (Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, & Maxwell, 2009). The model emphasizes mutual engagement through active listening, asking questions, and personal sharing in order to build understanding of each others’ experiences and the ability to critically reflect on one’s own perspectives based on these dialogic exchanges, as well as foster alliance building and positive interaction, collaboration, and action across difference (Sorensen et al., 2009). Moreover, the authors posit that such dialog and reflection on the ways in which power and inequality influence one’s own and others’ experiences, sets a foundation from which to address such issues within the community (Sorensen et al., 2009). In sum, adult mentors can play a more empowering role by positioning themselves as resources or “co-learners” rather than taking charge or playing the role of “expert.” Such mentoring can help prepare youth to fully participate in a democratic society by working with youth to co-create structures, policies, and dynamics that foster mutual decision-making and co-governance practices. Moreover, collaborating with mentees in youth organizing efforts might also prime them to become mentors for succeeding

generations of program participants. To do this, and avoid simply enlisting mentees to adopt adults' agendas, mentors must develop self-awareness about personal assumptions and values as they help youth identify their own interests and values to apply in a shared mission.

Sharing power, however, does not mean that adults have to give up their power. Camino (2000) argues that adults working in Y-APs frequently confuse the concepts of institutional and personal power – wishing to yield some of their institutional power to youth, they also often give up their personal power that is found in their experience and wisdom. For example, youth participants of a Y-AP program explained that they learned little from their adult partners because the latter scarcely said anything during shared activities. Adults explained that because they construed the program as one emphasizing youth empowerment, they thought they were playing a helpful role by attending meetings and events with youth, but not speaking. The adults had not realized that this abdication of personal power was detrimental to the program's effectiveness and ultimately frustrating for youth.

Giving voice

A central concept within CP is that of “voice” (Goodman et al., 2004), which has served as a metaphor for presence, power, participation, protest, and identity. A central assumption of CP is that dominant Western culture has devalued relational, collectivist, and subjective ways of being, thereby devaluing people – such as females and ethnic minorities – whose identities are often shaped by these values (Brown, 1994). In a similar vein, stereotyping young people with derogatory descriptors, such as “immature,” “impulsive,” “self-centered,” “naïve,” “reckless,” or “troubled” may also be considered a devaluation of a whole group of people. Indeed, despite American society's general claims to value young people, popular rhetoric regarding youth and youth culture simultaneously reflects “a series of interlocking discourses which serve to problematize and marginalize children” (Roche, 1999, p. 475). Just as negative stereotypes provide a rationale for racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination, such views of youth are the basis of “adulthoodism.”

Furthermore, PYD contends that if adults were to look for assets rather than deficits in youth, they would be likely to discover the energy, enthusiasm, and constructive aspects of youthful idealism and risk-taking – which have often been framed as problems in adolescent literature and the popular press. Thus, to counteract the devaluing of youth, CP and PYD asks advocates to “give voice” to youth by championing their expressions of identity, values, and needs that may have been previously misunderstood or unheard by others. In the context of youth mentoring, “giving voice” would require that adults see problems, strengths, and solutions through the lens of the value systems held by their mentees and members of the mentee's community.

Moreover, mentors could give voice to youth by helping them communicate their needs, wishes, and strengths. This requires that mentors humbly enter into the lives of youth as learners and collaborators, seeking to win trust and an intimate understanding of their unique needs and wishes, as well as understanding barriers in communicating them. This process of building trust and understanding can facilitate the relevancy and success of a host of specific activities that “give voice” to youth, such as enabling them to communicate their ideas to policy makers and the media (Goodman et al., 2004).

Mutual role-modeling

In the field of youth development, the term “youth–adult partnership” refers to a relationship in which both youth and adults learn from one another, contribute to decision-making, and act together to promote change in programs and communities. Indeed, youth can serve as role-models for adult mentors. Research demonstrates that youth input can improve organizational visioning and strategic planning (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Zeldin et al., 2005). Youth can be bold in raising social justice and equity issues that adults might avoid, or not even see. For example, students have cited structural and classroom procedures that inadvertently lead to discrimination or thwart student learning and opportunities to form mentoring relationships (Colatos & Morrell, 2003; Mitra, 2009). Y-AP research also demonstrates that youth can play an integral role in organizational visioning and strategic planning (Mitra, 2009) as well as serving as researchers and witnesses, documenting school policies that exacerbate achievement gaps, and identifying ways in which detrimental school conditions can adversely affect students' psychological, social, and academic well-being (Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, 2007).

As important as it is to confer power, privilege, and voice to youth, common pitfalls of Y-AP programs include the assumptions that adults should get out of the way and pass all power and all roles of importance to youth (Camino, 2000). Effective youth–adult partnerships are characterized by mutual teaching and learning, as all participants assume leadership roles in some aspect of their collaborative effort (Camino, 2000). In interviews with youth and observations of adult–youth relationships from numerous Y-AP programs, Camino recognized that youth desire to share tasks and responsibilities with adults, rather than take charge of everything themselves (2005). Specifically, youth seek adult participation through coaching, guidance, partnership on tasks, and role-modeling.

Mentors can play a defining role in sowing the initial seeds of interest in civic engagement, activism, and social change. This may be done through role-modeling both the attitude and skills necessary in such work. Role-modeling activism includes demonstrating an attitude of critical consciousness and a sense of purpose to youth mentees. PYD scholars have noted that it is often an adult mentor outside the family who first introduces purpose and inspires youth to take up a cause (Damon, 2008). However, this may become more and more challenging in our increasingly competitive capitalist society. In fact, Damon (2008) cites past research indicating that 1960's college freshmen considered “developing a meaningful

philosophy of life” an essential or very important goal, whereas “being very well-off financially” was considered much less important. Today, the opposite is true, and Damon (2008) partially attributes this reversal to the changing values of adults, many of whom are now discouraging youth from their natural idealism to help them get ahead in today’s competitive marketplace. This well-intentioned, yet pessimistic, approach may ultimately disempower youth because it is out of sync with their developmental stage and also because it has no sustaining conviction of its own.

To offset negative role-modeling, mentors are needed who hold a more optimistic stance – one that inspires youth toward a meaningful calling in the face of economic realities. This transmission of attitudes and values takes place when mentors share how they derive meaning in their lives and convey their own sense of purpose in, and passion for their work, life engagements, and long-term causes. Moreover, through sharing life experiences, a mentor may demonstrate to a young person how one may simultaneously pursue a meaningful cause and manage the financial demands of that chosen path. This is particularly important as economic status, among other demographic variables, has been considered a significant barrier to cultivating purpose among youth from low-income backgrounds due to issues such as insufficient resources in schools, communities, and the labor force. However, Damon (2008) highlights that cultivating purpose is critical and possible for all youth regardless of economic status, race, ethnicity, or geographic location. He explains the importance of providing role models and mentors in youths’ areas of interest, no matter what their background, to inspire in youth the idealism, competence, and confidence to become role models in their communities and to pursue engagements that are meaningful to them.

Learning by collaborative doing

In addition to role-modeling attitudes conducive to youth activism, adult mentors may model for youth how this work may be done (Stoneman, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Youth mentoring in community organizing takes place in the context of interactions between mentors, youth, and other community participants. These “live” interactions capture the excitement of community organizing and importance of critical consciousness by their immediacy, and thus become mentoring moments. Mentors have the opportunity to role-model specific skills as they collaborate closely and transparently with youth on a project.

Learning by doing for others has long been supported in the CP literature in terms of service learning (Prillentsky, 2001). Service learning and CP share assumptions and values, such as empowerment, competence, sense of community, social action and change, caring and compassion, collaboration, and citizen participation (Prillentsky, 2001; Rappaport & Seidman, 2000). Similarly, service learning and PYD also share values and assumptions, such as collaborative purposeful activity, contribution to society, initiative, and structured voluntary activities through which participants learn specific skills while engaged in service (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003).

Stoneman (2002) depicts such collaboration through an example of how adults may mentor a group of youth in writing and consensus-building – skills that are critical in helping youth activists prepare documents for policy input. Through an iterative process, youth share their ideas while adults write them down, plucking every youth’s idea for valuable grains to be incorporated into the document. Even if much of the writing and proofing for correct grammar has been done by the adult, youths share a sense of ownership for the document when they have done the thinking, editing, and coming to consensus over its content. Similarly, Watts and Flanagan (2007) provide examples of ways adults may help youth gain specific skills and experience in both community organizing and youth development. In one project, student leaders of the non-profit organization, Kids First!, led a coalition that organized hundreds of students, parents, and elected officials in a successful effort to change a regional transportation policy by providing free bus passes for students who qualify for subsidized lunch programs. Adult collaborators played an important role by passing on to youth technical skills and information on transportation policy and other topics requiring specialized expertise. While youth organized and governed a campaign, adult collaborators joined them by researching issues, helping to frame the campaign, developing connections with potential allies by tapping into their other networks, along with supporting youth in other ways. Simultaneously, the adults engaged youth in PYD exercises designed to enhance their socio-emotional development, self-exploration, and critical consciousness in the sociopolitical realm. By engaging youth in learning and doing at the same time, theory moves to practice, and youth move from collecting tools to using them successfully.

Addressing systemic barriers

In addition to role-modeling activism and engaging in collaborative doing, mentors must advocate for youth by identifying and addressing relevant systemic barriers to youth activism and participation in social change. Involving mentees in this process is critical for preparing and empowering youth. Addressing systemic issues, such as societal barriers to youth empowerment, has long been a focus in CP (Rappaport & Seidman, 2000) and is an emerging focus in PYD. Leaders in the field have suggested ways for changing youth policies to better facilitate a PYD agenda, such as noting the importance of building a political support system from existing constituencies committed to youth (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000; Pittman, Yohalem, & Irby, 2003). Youth mentoring informed by PYD and CP perspectives would similarly seek to have mentors actively working with their mentees to identify and address societal barriers to youth activism.

Y-AP researchers (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Stoneman, 2002) all provide evidence of the ubiquitous and insidious nature of societal barriers. Watts and Flanagan (2007) point out how community institutions, such as schools and the police, mediate the relationship between individuals and the state, and thus may inadvertently privilege some youth while disadvantaging others. For instance, while the education system is supposed to be the great equalizer it

succumbs to certain practices (e.g., tracking and culturally biased testing), which can reinforce social class inequities. Moreover, the hierarchical structure, norms of deference to adult authority, and separation of adult and youth roles within school settings creates inherent barriers to youth–adult partnerships (Mitra et al., 2010). Similarly, certain police practices (e.g., racial profiling) may result in an over-representation of ethnic minorities in the juvenile justice system. These dynamics only serve to pit youth against adults as well as against societal institutions (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Similarly, Camino and Zeldin (2002) note how even the standard pathways for voting and voluntary service carry limitations for young people. These authors discuss the discrepancy between the current low levels of youth interest and participation in voting and politics, despite high interest among youth in community service. They point to literature that attributes this discrepancy to the lack of specific youth relevant agendas put forth by political candidates and the lack of mentoring given to youth about the nature of the voting process and its implications. These shortcomings exemplify significant societal barriers to youth participation and activism.

Furthermore, societal barriers that undermine youth agency are ubiquitous even in youth organizations that ostensibly value youth empowerment. Stoneman (2002) notes that even when youth are encouraged to be involved on governing committees, they may be charged with marginal tasks that support adult roles but do not encroach on adult control (e.g., planning entertainment for other youth or determining penalties for youth who have broken rules). Rarely do organizations include young people in decision-making around the hiring of staff, setting of budgets, fundraising, and setting of policies that must be adhered to by adult staff – yet these are the tasks in which youth involvement could generate great benefit for youth and for the organization (Stoneman, 2002). Within the context of a mentoring partnership, however, it is hoped that many of these barriers may be addressed and overcome.

To address such systemic barriers, CP theory might suggest that mentors and mentees engage in “consciousness-raising.” Such effort could be directed toward raising awareness in organizations and among policy makers about youths’ needs and assets, as well as about the ways in which individual youth problems may often be rooted in larger sociopolitical and historical forces, such as racism, sexism, and adultism (Ballou & Brown, 2002). Raising awareness would serve to identify youth as important stakeholders in organizations and counter themes prevalent in dominant culture, such as “youth are trouble-makers, self-focused, irresponsible” (Riger, 2000).

An integrated social justice approach to mentoring: realistic or idealistic?

Since we are arguing for both an organizational shift (similar to the Y–AP model), as well as a shift in the nature of one-to-one mentoring relationships, some readers may wonder whether practicing the proposed principles might over burden mentoring programs, as well as mentors who are already sacrificing time, energy and resources, or who are not already involved in community or social justice work. Thus, it is important to note that in some cases and settings, applying the principles may require more of a philosophical shift rather than a complete departure from traditional mentoring activities. In fact, on the surface, there may be few noticeable differences in the mentoring relationship or the commitment it involves. The most significant difference may be the ensuing sense of purpose, mutual engagement, and empowerment among mentors and mentees. At the most basic level, these principles call mentors to be more mindful of the goals of strength-building and empowerment, and to look for everyday opportunities to build purpose-seeking youth.

We offer a number of examples for applying the principles to varying degrees and in a variety of settings – ranging from taking on major mentor/mentee partnerships for social change or lobbying for special interests, to getting involved in community service, to simply sharing personal reflections with youth on how the mentor derives meaning in his or her work and life engagements. For instance, in a New England church, youth have been co-opted in multi-generational initiatives, such as co-chairing service projects (i.e., Boston AIDS Africa, Summer Missions clean-up in New Orleans). Similarly, the Principal of a New England high school has appointed and closely mentored a high school student to be the coordinators of a school-wide humanitarian project that reaches out to youth in communities in Kenya where female genital mutilation is practiced. This project engages U.S. and Kenyan secondary school classrooms in a digitally mediated “pen-pal” correspondence called “Postcards for Peace” – a social support and educational intervention for participants. In yet another example, through mentoring, the first author’s daughter (age 11), was empowered to go to the State House in order to lobby for three-wheeled electric cars as she wanted to take effective action toward the legalization of alternative fuel vehicles that would save energy and the environment. In this way, mentors and youth may collaborate to influence policy makers who have power to then influence specific social institutions, structures, or norms. Raising awareness among policy makers and organizations is often a prerequisite to social change (Prillentsky, 1989).

Finally, the first and third authors have mentored high school and college students in the context of developing GenerationPulse.org, a website that connects youth across the globe. This is a website designed for youth by youth as a forum where they can dialog about current events, share support, and advocate for social change. Through the building of this outreach tool, participating youth have gained a sense of purpose and social justice, along with new skillsets as varied as web development, writing news stories, leadership, and organization management. Moreover, mentors and mentees have shared a deep and meaningful camaraderie through successful outreaches to youth displaced by Hurricane Katrina and child soldiers in Northern Uganda. These stories provide a few examples of the limitless ways to engage youth in a cause they care about and thus create a rich, empowering context for mentoring youth toward positive development.

Adopting the proposed framework does call for a shift in mentors’ perspectives toward youth which is reflected in everyday interactions, such as the focus of discussions with youth, activities selected, and the sharing of power within the

mentoring relationship. Ultimately, promoting youths' strengths and working with youth to explore what gives purpose to their lives may be the most impactful mentoring intervention – one that builds a generation of thoughtful and active citizens. While there are limitless ways to adopt this approach in practice, what we are suggesting is that enacting the core principles of this approach primarily involves a shift in perspective and ways of engaging youth. We propose that even the smallest efforts may serve to instill a sense of individual and collective empowerment that fosters change individually, within youths' communities, and in the world at large.

Modifications or future challenges

The Y–AP model may also apply to youth who need therapeutic services, particularly those who are reluctant to engage in traditional counseling. For those with more intensive psychological needs (trauma, attachment challenges, low trust of adults, impulsivity or emotional lability), mentoring organizations may need to clarify their purposes and enhance infrastructure to prepare mentors for engaging effectively with such youth. In particular, mentors might benefit from training on how to encourage these youth to sustain interest, to not become too easily discouraged, and to invest in incremental steps of progress. Mentors may need support with having constructive dialogs with mentees when their good intentions are met with inconsistent efforts or a testing of limits of their mutual dedication both to the relationship and to bringing about change on a macro level. Moreover, for youth with therapeutic needs, mentoring may serve as a complement to therapeutic guidance. For example, a mentee who is depressed or suicidal because of questionable legal status and discouragement about access to college education might be empowered through collaborating with a mentor on a project, such as the Dream Act; and this youth advocacy partnership could be extremely powerful in conjunction with traditional therapy that teaches better coping methods for dealing with frustration. Mentors would do well to carefully consider how to leverage the Y–AP model among youth with more intensive psychological needs, without creating unrealistic expectations.

Conclusion

According to PYD theorists (e.g., Damon, 2008), adults should enable youth to find a sense of purpose by making a difference in the world around them, perhaps redressing the very social ills that have oppressed or otherwise harmed them. Mentors who collaborate with youth in social justice activism exemplify an integration of PYD and CP perspectives. Modeling and encouraging a sense of agency and purpose in youth can have the profound effect of transforming youth's perspectives of themselves from passive recipients to change agents.

This article outlined specific, yet flexible principles to be applied in mentoring – in various settings and to varying degrees – to empower youth, foster their sense of ownership, purpose, and mastery, and stimulate community building. Furthermore, we contend that if adults were to look for assets over deficits in youth, they would likely discover the energy and constructive aspects of youthful idealism and risk-taking, which have often been framed as problems in adolescent literature. Thus, to counteract the devaluing of youth, the integration of CP and PYD asks advocates to “give voice” to youth by championing their expressions of identity, values, and needs that have been previously misunderstood or unheard. In this way, the goal of mentoring may expand beyond changing mentees to one that focuses on establishing the kind of empowering connection that equips mentees to go change their world.

These principles and goals for youth mentoring can also be used to shape research on youth mentoring. While previous research has focused on assessing the reduction of psychosocial and behavioral problems in youth mentees, the current perspective creates new research questions that introduce additional outcome and process variables. For instance, individual level outcomes of youth mentoring may include increased sense of agency, purpose, level of civic participation or engagement in school or community, interest in social justice, or the attainment of skills (e.g., planning, oral and written communication, knowledge of social issues and policies, research) relevant to activism in a particular setting. Relational level outcomes and process variables may tap the degree and nature of mutuality, the balance of power in the mentoring relationship, and the nature and quality of community partnerships between youth, mentors, and community leaders. Additionally, research should incorporate contextual variables to assess the impact of youth mentoring on the setting in which it occurs (e.g., effects of youth mentoring on raising awareness, affecting policy, or other relevant changes that occur in settings through effective mentoring and community partnerships).

In summary, we hope this article serves as a catalyst for new perspectives that will continue to advance and positively transform the field of youth mentoring. Our suggestions, and the implications of our integrated approach, are a work in progress and are intended to be flexible to the ever-changing nature of our world and the world of our children. We hope new ideas spawn from this starting point and look forward to reflections, contributions, and challenges to our work within research and practice.

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