



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



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### 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, &

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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

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