PATHWAYS FOR YOUTH MENTORING: MERGING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to elicit a richer conversation for youth development practitioners and academic researchers related to the approach of youth mentoring training based on Vygotsky's (1967) sociocultural and activity theory. More specifically to conceptualize and guide youth mentoring research, particularly in inner-city communities where the environments can be most challenging to the health, social and academic development of young people. Recently, there has been an increasing call for youth development researchers to direct their efforts toward solving contemporary social problems that plague today's youth, particularly in environments that are most challenging to the well-being and academic development of our young people. While youth development practitioners are seen as being on the "front line" and continuously engaged in this endeavor, academic institutions are sometimes viewed by social activists as being self-serving and not fully committed to such endeavors. Using the principles of activity theory, this paper advances previous literature proposing a participatory paradigm as a basis for shared youth development work between practitioners and academic researchers. The paper describes the elements of a participatory youth mentoring training program and presents a case example to demonstrate its' characteristics.*

Key-words: *Mentor training; positive youth development; sociocultural and activity theory*

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1. Introduction

Recently, there has been a strong push for researchers to engage in youth development research with clear behavioral, academic, and socioeconomic implications. However, academicians who understand the role of youth and community voice in research are pushing for a more inclusive theoretically driven research methodology. Rather one in which the researcher does not solely control the process; a participatory approach in which researchers, practitioners, and participants negotiate the process. Moving to this process enables a greater number of features of the program itself to be explored, as well as the broader context within which it was implemented. Without given priority to these issues, it is more likely to undermine 'the development of the empowerment and voice of the participants, which we argue are key preconditions for program success. In relation to the program itself, the preference for didactic methods and frameworks encourages a participant-driven nature of the project and negative learner attitudes to the program.

2. Defining positive youth development

While there are a myriad of definitions that define positive youth development, the authors are drawn to the definition created by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development which states.

Positive youth development strives to help young people develop the inner resources and skills they need to cope with pressures that might lead to unhealthy and antisocial behaviors. It aims to promote and prevent, not to treat or remediate. Prevention of undesirable behaviors is one outcome of positive youth development, but there are others including the production of self-reliant, self confident adults who can become responsible members of society (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992).

This inclusive definition centers on an approach that includes the voices of youth and the presence of caring adults. It addresses the broader development needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models, which tend to focus on youth problems. Our strengths based definition provides for a more natural learning process to occur between youth and adults (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins, 1998; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Pittman and Cahill, 1991), and takes into account important development constructs (see Table 1 below) which when incorporated into youth programs have proven successful for both the youth and the adults involved.

Table 1

Positive Youth Development Constructs

1. Promotes bonding
2. Fosters resilience
3. Promotes social competence
4. Promotes emotional competence
5. Promotes cognitive competence
6. Promotes behavioral competence
7. Promotes moral competence
8. Fosters self-determination
9. Fosters spirituality
10. Fosters self-efficacy
11. Fosters clear and positive identity
12. Fosters belief in the future
13. Provides recognition for positive behavior
14. Provides opportunities for prosocial involvement
15. Fosters prosocial norms

Source: R.F. Catalano, M.L. Berglund, J.A.M. Ryan, H.S. Lonczak, and J.D. Hawkins, 2002.

In order to achieve these successes, youth are often situated in social learning environments that increasingly support positive behaviors, attitudes, and values (Quinn, 1995). This trend is linked to earlier shifts toward adaptive educational techniques to keep youth engaged and as a means to provide formal and informal opportunities and experiences that support youth. For example, Ison and Watson (2007) define social learning "as achieving concerted action in complex and uncertain situations". It is argued that those involved in positive social systems may learn and therefore enhance their adaptive capacity through their involvement in decision making processes, critical thinking, connections to the larger community, and caring relationships (Kriete and Bechtel, 2002; Quinn, 1999). Research suggests that comprehensive, high quality programs, as defined above, create positive experiences and opportunities for the young people, the adults, and the community at large. In this article, we attempt to clarify the concept of social learning and what it means in the context of relationships between youth and adults.

Early work conceptualized social learning as individual learning that takes place in a social context and is hence influenced by social norms, e.g., by imitating role models (Bandura, 1977). However, this conceptualization is not particularly useful, because most learning takes place in some social context. Recently, a different school of thought has arisen, as reflected in a number of articles (e.g., Pahl-Wostl 2006, Ison and Watson 2007, Mostert et al. 2007; Pahl-Wostl et al. 2007*a,b*; Steyaert and Ollivier 2007; Tàbara and Pahl-Wostl 2007; Pahl-Wostl et al. 2008; Prell et al. 2008).

This paper proposes an alternative youth mentoring training approach, based on Vygotsky's (1967) sociocultural and activity theory, to conceptualize and guide youth mentoring research, particularly in inner-city communities where the environments can be most challenging to the health, social and academic development of young people. The paper stresses the nature of learning and the interactions between academic personnel (trainers and researchers), youth development professionals (practitioner), and the youth and adult participants (communities) in youth mentoring.

3. Communities of Practice

For the purposes of this paper, youth mentoring initiatives are programs or projects that are interventions for positive change in the social, emotional, academic, behavioral, mental and physical health of young people. Such initiatives involve both a prevention and intervention component. Arguably, the triangular interaction between the academic researcher(s), the practitioner(s), and the community(s) participants is a central determinant of the levels of success and/or failure of youth mentoring intervention. Wertsch's (1998) sociocultural and activity theory approach is employed for the purpose of better conceptualizing this triangular interaction. Activity theorists purport that individuals need to focus on the joint activity in which they are involved in order to comprehend the nature of the interaction (Van Vlaenderen, 2004). According to the educators Lave and Wenger (1991), the concept of communities of practice is present on a daily basis. They consider that people are generally involved in a number of them ranging from school, home, and work and even in civic and leisure activities. Etienne Wenger was later to write:

> Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2007).

In order to understand how Lave approaches the concept of community of practice, we have to understand that human behavior is culturally and socially mediated towards a purpose, whose meaning is understood within a social context (Wertsch, 1998). Lave's (1991) term "community of practice" captures this idea in the most holistic of manners. Lave contends that an activity is socially situated and grounded in the movements or enterprises taken on by people.

Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty

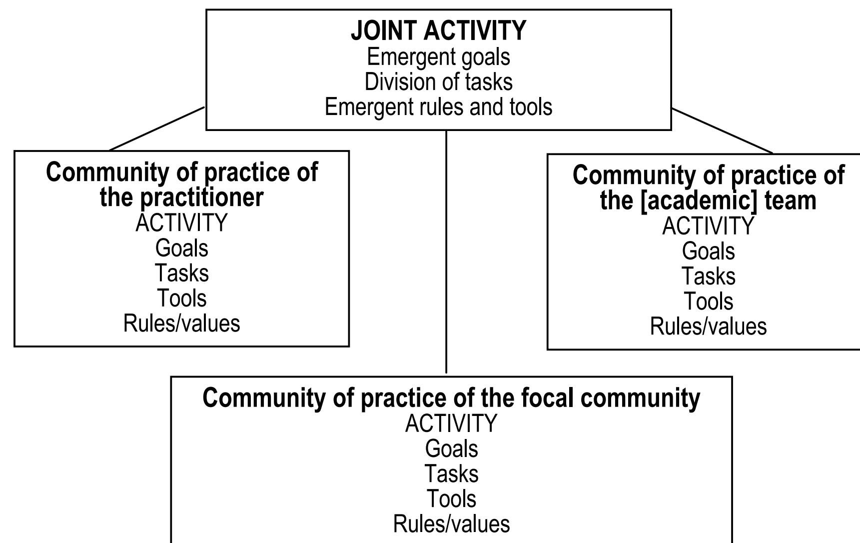
pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words we learn (Wenger, 1998, p. 5).

As Van Vlaenderen (2004) states, "a community of practice provides goals, structure, meaning and values/rules, significance and tools for those engaging in the activity" (p. 136).

Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities, communities of practice. (Wenger, 1998, p. 45)

Borrowing from the ideas of Gilbert (1996), the process of a youth mentoring training program can be understood as a gathering of different communities of practice in a single activity. Within this community of practice framework, the academic trainers and researchers, the practitioners who work directly with youth in a professional capacity, and the community participants interact with each other on activities that are embedded in each of their particular goals, tasks, tools, and rules/values. Figure 1 is a modification of Van Vlaenderen's (2004) model in order to apply it to a particular youth mentoring training program that also includes an additional community (i.e. practitioner).

Figure 1
Merging of triangular communities of practice of a youth mentoring project.
Adapted from Vlaenderen (2004, p. 137).



3.1. Facilitating the Merger of Communities of Practice

The integration of communities of practice requires a type of approach to youth development intervention that must not limit itself to the prevailing positivist methods mostly associated with academic researchers. It requires a course of action which makes known and reaches understanding of the distinctiveness between the communities. This explicit understanding will hopefully develop into a jointly owned youth mentoring intervention process.

Local knowledge, or knowledge that is mostly represented by the focal community and the practitioners of that community, is represented within the concepts of goals, tools, and rules/values. Local knowledge is tacit and refers to 'what is' and 'how things are done' (Van Vlaenderen, 2004). For communities to engage in an authentic joint activity, it is necessary that the academic researchers utilize the local knowledge of the communities and incorporate the local knowledge in the on-going development of the intervention process.

3.2. The Participatory Process

A researcher typically guides all phases of the youth intervention process, including development, implementation, supervision, data collection and analysis, and sustainability or closure (Lutz and Neis, 2008; McIntyre, 2007). However, applying communities of practice approach involves a joint effort between the academic researcher, practitioner, and members of the focal community (Brown and Vega, 1996; Brydon-Miller and Greenwood, 2006). Additionally, within a participatory approach (Leadbeater, 2006; Zlotkowski, 1999), input from practitioners and community members are necessary to avoid cognitively alienating any of the communities, thus making the processes of the intervention firmly rooted within the community of practice of the researcher. As noted by Van Vlaanderen (2001), the participatory process involves a number of techniques that include the voices, perceptions, opinions and most importantly, the vision of the community. Participatory approaches increasingly communicate a more trusting relationship among stakeholders as well as other possible social and long term relational and program benefits such as sustained results. A vivid example is presented in order to illustrate this point.

3.3. Participatory: The Meeting of Minds

In the fall of 2010, two researchers and 4 graduate students from a research institution in the northeast embarked upon a youth development training program to influence the manner in which mentors and mentees interacted. The participatory

mentor training program was developed with an emphasis to increase the ability of the mentor/mentee pair to feel empowered and engaged throughout the mentoring process. Attention was given to the understanding of the process of engagement, connection, and bonding—critical components needed in a quality participatory mentoring program.

After the development of the foundation of the Three Phase (3P) Mentor Training Program, the research team worked with the local Cooperative Extension Service staff to further develop the core content of the training program. Through numerous rounds of discussions, it was decided that the intent was to provide activities, tools, and resources to guide youth and adults through the process of engaging equally and authentically to enhance successful mentoring partnerships within established mentoring programs. Foundations of effective youth and adult partnerships were explored and included the nuts and bolts of soft skill development, effective communication and cultural competence framework to enhance and sustain the mentoring relationship. The team wanted to improve the effectiveness of youth and adult relationships in existing youth mentoring programs and community programs that have an established history of adult-youth engagement (e.g. Boys and Girls Clubs of America, after-school programs, YMCA, and the like). Given the unique format of the 3P Mentoring Training Program, the adult mentor and youth mentee were both participants in the training. We recognized that this method was not the typical approach to mentoring training, which focuses on preparing mentors for mentoring and does not typically consider preparing mentees for the mentoring relationship. The research team along with cooperative extension staff and a community liaison was assigned the task of piloting the program in the city of Philadelphia. It was decided to roll out the program in this particular county because of the solid connections with existing mentoring groups and organizations within the city.

After several introductory meetings consisting of the academic researchers, a youth development professional and the principal (practitioners) of the middle school where the trainings occurred, it was clear that the practitioners' local influence and knowledge provided a more realistic context of the community setting and participants, as well as matters involving program logistics and accessibility to local resources. This was essential to the feasibility of the trainings and helped construct the roles within this participatory approach. For example, the practitioners knew where the youth participants resided, and had access to local resources that were able to arrange the means of transport to the training site, whether by school vans, personal vehicles, or providing tokens to cover the fare for public transportation.

The process of selecting the dates and times of the trainings was highly influenced by the practitioners whose familiarity with the participants and community background knowledge and experiences helped determine the best training dates and times for youth and adult participants. Moreover, the youth development

practitioners had relationships with the various adult community members who were caregivers of the youth we sought to assist. In some communities, particularly in minority communities, it is important to be aware of the existence of cultural norms that adhere to generational hierarchy (Ward and Webster, 2011). The practitioners already established respectful relationships with many of the caregivers, as the rightful gatekeepers to the youth of the community that was rewarded by trust and access (Webster and Ingram, 2007). The established relationships with caregivers were important for gaining access to the youth participants. Quite often, academic researchers are rarely positioned to establish such relationships.

4. Participatory: Academic Team, Focal Community, and Practitioners

3P Mentoring Training Overview for the Philadelphia Site

The training material primarily focused on training existing mentors and youth protégés, and included activities and program resources that totaled to about fifteen hours of training. The agenda was broken into three separate sessions to accommodate volunteers' busy schedules.

Because the tone of a mentor-youth relationship can be set quickly during the first few meetings, it was important to develop training that allowed for both youth and adults to learn jointly and independently of one another. Thus, the activities were intended to build on key concepts and lessons learned within each group and then discussed more fully or reiterated within the larger joint group. The 15 mentors and 15 mentees represented members of the focal community. And the practitioners (a middle school principle, 2 teachers, and 3 other youth development professionals) helped facilitate the training where appropriate and manage youth behavior when necessary.

Out of the 30 youth and adult community participants involved in the training program, 27 were Black American or of African/Caribbean descent and the remaining 3 were White American. There was an even gender mix with 15 males and 15 females. The adult community participants represented a range of professions, from community activists, teachers, corporate employees, and self-employed. All of the students were in grades 10 and 11 and were from three different city high schools in Philadelphia.

Training content provided motivators that adults have identified for youth to have for success such as self-efficacy, confidence, self-motivation, critical thinking and coping skills – which can lead to resiliency, academic persistence and an overall positive outlook on life.

The expectations upon completion of the training, was that participants (both youth and adults) would be empowered to work with one another, understand the “place” from which they come and use these experiences to create a lasting bond with one another. This bond would hopefully transcend beyond the usual mentor/youth relationship, and provide both with a platform to make a difference in each other’s lives.

Delivery mode. The training occurred in three sessions. Each session lasted approximately four hours. The activities were intended to help the mentoring program accomplish its goals and to address individual program contexts. To emphasize this point, the youth development professionals often acted as impromptu co-facilitators to offer direction to the mentors and mentees of their programs to serve their need. For example, during the second training session, the professionals matched youth with mentors for the activities. Activities engaged the pairs to explore topics, listen to one another, and push each other outside of their boundaries. Critical to the training was the opportunity for pairs to establish best practices for communication and interactions. Other key components of the training included group activities, individual reflection time. Although the university trainers did not plan to implement the activities in that manner, it was clear to the trainers that matching the youth with mentors was vital to the goals of the training program, thus the trainers adapted accordingly.

At the completion of the program, an honor reception was held. Participants were presented with a certificate of completion and were formally recognized as P3 graduates to community partners, city officials and other stakeholders.

Evaluation. Upon completion of the program, all participants were given a self-survey to assess their attitudes, knowledge and behaviors as it related to mentoring and youth and adult relationships. Information collected from the survey was used to inform the grant funders, practitioners, and researchers about the process of quality mentoring training programs and assist the academic team in revising components of the manual for future training sessions.

Reflection, Feedback and Self-Survey

Reflection. After each activity, youth and adult participants considered how the exploratory experiences, knowledge, and sharing of ideas related to their own lives, their community, and the mentoring relationship. Through varied discussion, they thought about their needs and the needs of others, their actions, their impacts, knowledge gained, what went well and what did not go so well, and their contribution. This reflection and discussion process included both analytical and affective responses and enabled all participants to reflect in the moment and give what we felt more honest and open ended responses.

Feedback. Trainers often assess training at the end of the training program. However, for a training program with multiple training sessions, knowing how things are going in the daily training sessions from participants is more advantageous for measuring and achieving participant engagement. The university team received beneficial feedback from the practitioners and adult volunteer mentors following the first training session. For example, the feedback revealed that the mentoring programs were the impetus for future trainings between youth and adults and would require minor adjustments to recognize the infancy stage of the mentor pairs. Also, many of the mentors did not distinguish between a tutor and a mentor thus understood their role as a mentor was synonymous with the role of a tutor. The university team, practitioners, and some of the mentors cooperatively agreed that the participants would need a foundation of mentoring, and increased emphasis on relationship building incorporated in the trainings.

The trainers capitalized on the idea of post training session feedback by incorporating a structured method for collecting comments. They decided to use the Plus/Delta feedback tool (sometimes called Plus/Change) as a means of identifying what was working well and what should be changed between training sessions. The desirability of this tool was its ability to direct trainees to focus on what is working to advance their learning in the training program and what trainers and facilitators can improve. The tool was implemented in the following manner. After the conclusion of the second training session, the members of the research and training team posted two Post-it® Easel Pads at each of the two exits. One of the easel pads at each exit was for the Plus feedback and the other was for the Delta feedback. The Plus feedback was to capture what worked well during the training. The Delta feedback was to capture what to change or improve upon in future trainings. Participants were provided with Post-it® Notes and were asked to provide unlimited open-ended feedback and post on the appropriate easel pad. They could provide as many feedback notes as they wished because we did not want to people to feel that they had to prioritize their feelings. The university trainers also decided that by not putting limitations on what the participants could write would capture more substantive feedback. Therefore, they did not mind knowing if the room was too hot or that participants did not prefer the lunch provided. Even if there were factors beyond the university's team and practitioners' control, these factors still played a role in the training experience and possibly may be addressed to some degree. The responses were collected, summarized, and led to important and necessary adjustments prior to the next training (see Table 2).

Table 2

Results from Plus/Delta Feedback Following the 2nd Training Session

Positive (PLUS)	Please Change (DELTA)
"Everybody came together and it was fun."	"I think we could be more social with other groups (mentors, mentees)."[a]
"I think we all came together more."	"Identity Mangle *activity* [researcher insert]: More time should be placed on the reason why we chose our answers."
"Communication for cohesion."	"Match mentor/mentee earlier (at least conceptually)."[b]
"The activities (today) were exceptional."	"Something that I think that need improvement is the organization of the activities."
"Good activities and finding out where we are similar and different."	"Meeting more people in the group."
"Interaction with "the mentee."	"More one-on-one time with our personal mentors."
"Discussion of differences and commonalities."	
"I enjoyed everyone's company."	
"Real dialogue!"	
"Class Reunion activity. Good!"	
"I thought that today's curriculum was great because we was able to communicate among each other."	
"Had a good conversation with my mentor."	"More time between mentors and mentees scheduled."
"The exercises were concise."	
"I think the students were more interested today. They participated more."	"Continue with the participatory exercises."
"Interacting with each other."	

[a] *The participant's comment is understood by the training staff to mean that he or she wanted participants to interact with others who are not their mentor/mentee or who are not seated at their table.*

[b] *Participants were matched with their mentor/mentee at the beginning of the day. Thus, the participant preferred the matching to have occurred in the first training (1st Phase).*

As demonstrated in Table 2, participants' social interaction with each other (quantity and quality) played an important role in how they viewed the training. Also several comments could be interpreted as having a proclivity toward a sense of community. Considering the social and relational requests expressed by community youth and

adult participants, the trainers adjusted the delivery of activities to allow for more youth and adult social engagement. Although the duration of activities was previously scheduled, trainers allowed for the continuation of activities that incited a great deal of discussion and expression among participants.

Self-Survey. The survey was connected to the 3P Mentoring Training Program and the process relied on the research knowledge of researchers on the university team. The researchers largely determined the content and format of the questionnaire and the university team distributed the survey.

Despite several program highlights, the process was not without its deficiencies and flaws. In hindsight, a participatory research approach would have been more preferable because the practitioners were not significant contributors in the research and evaluation process. As a result, the practitioners' ideas and interests may not have been captured in the survey design and data collection process. Although the practitioners worked with the university research and training team to implement the program, they were not included in the program evaluation process which affected the perceived necessity for follow-up communication by the university team. As a result, the intervention had little potential for sustained results because the project was seen as the universities project. A program reflection piece, inclusive of the three communities, at the conclusion of the training program would have been highly desirable and beneficial for all parties.

5. Conclusions

This paper highlights the successes, challenges, and sometimes discrepancy between the conceptual and methodological approaches used by social science researchers in the host community to contribute to advancing youth development research and practice in the community while involving communities in stages of the intervention process. A participatory research approach, which accompanies the participatory intervention (e.g. development and training), may lead to more sustainable intervention outcomes. Activity theory is suggested as a suitable theoretical framework to conceptualize participatory youth development intervention and research in a global context. However achieving complete participatory intervention and research may not be practical or suitable in many circumstances where cultural norms, written and unwritten codes of conduct, government intervention, pedagogical differences, and other forms of philosophical incongruence pose as significant barriers to practice. Van Vlaenderen (2004, p. 143) emphasized that "participatory research is not an easy endeavor and that despite an adherence to the theory of participatory research, practical constraints and community dynamics may provide obstacles to a successful participatory approach". Another such constraint is often the demands made on social science researchers by funders and

academic departments that may not make a complete participatory intervention and research approach practical in many cases.

The genesis of this project was an interest to promote positive youth development in the form of paired mentoring training. Our mission was to enable transformation for individuals in their contexts by providing creative, participative processes that deal with issues of identity and facilitate awareness, communication and change. In an effort to further understand how this process contributed to positive mentoring relationships, we developed approaches that would promote participatory development. Our framework through which we worked brought together an understanding of the development that takes the pairs (youth and adult) and their holistic needs as the primary focus of development and sees the participation in the context of the community as a vital aspect of the way that development should take place.

We realized through this project that the participatory process was instrumental in the overall development, implementation and outcomes of the program. By including youth and mentors in the process, we appreciated that they were able to speak to issues that researchers, trainers and others affiliated with the program were completely naïve. More importantly, the process honored and centered the experiences of people most directly affected by issues in their communities. We were able to create a process where our participants were valued as experts in their own experiences, and allowed us to deliver information that spoke to their many different ways of knowing and being. By opening the process of program development, and incorporating the mentor and mentee voice, we created a participatory approach that integrally involved them in aspects of the design & implementation of the research, and of the analysis and distribution of the information gathered. Helping to facilitate a process that allowed for youth and mentors to contribute to their own process of learning enabled us to produce an active group of participants. Traditional training programs that encourage passive participation stifle the process of learning and engagement. Our program took a sharing approach to build community and movement, to develop leadership, and to empower individuals to take change. We did not develop this program to “prove” an assumption or hypothesis, but rather to test an idea that we felt would improve a process of teaching and learning and our *communities* as a way to make change.

Our principles and values towards the collective process guided the process and allowed us to stay accountable to our mentors and mentees throughout the process. Accountability is a universal condition for positive change in individuals and communities.

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