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YMAN Project Based Research: Critical Mentoring During a Pandemic & Uprisings

Kimberley Dunkley, Marnitta George & Brana Hill

Department of Education, Claremont Graduate University

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Organizing

Dr. Tessa Hicks Peterson

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Abstract

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and social justice uprisings have impacted the world greatly and left humanity shaken and grappling to make sense of how to move beyond the effects of the pandemic, and how best to eradicate systemic and institutionalized racism in all the places it exists. Many industries have shifted their protocols as they metamorphosize the way in which they conduct business and service with both internal and external constituent groups. A coupling of both of these occurrences have resulted in a crisis illuminating and further embellishing a multitude of problems within the educational and social services arena and many other sectors. The pandemic is substantially different from all health crises known to us resulting in larger disparities and inequitable services of People of Color. It is therefore urgent to re-evaluate what the COVID-19 pandemic and uprisings means for youth mentoring relationships. Using Critical Mentoring as a theoretical framework, this paper highlights common themes affecting youth and offers insight to ensure the relationships are sustained in ways that are meaningful, intentional, safe and meeting the needs of both the mentor and protegee. The study covers a period between March - July 2020. The main results show the role of safe practices during this pandemic and the social justice uprisings.

Keywords: Critical Mentorship, Anti-Racist, Social Media, Activist, Social Emotional Learning

Introduction

The coronavirus coupled with the George Floyd killing have coalesced into one major area of turmoil for people around the world. As local and federal laws worldwide stipulated that everyone had to stay in place, maintain space and cover their face to flatten the curve of the coronavirus, people found themselves having to contend with major changes of how and where they interacted with each other, accessed goods and services and, ultimately, had to reconfigure the way in which they live their day to day lives, (Irby & Pugliese, 2020). As a result, many of them sat home and watched helplessly as George Floyd, another unarmed black man was robbed of his life unfairly, resulting in an eruption of anger and outrage for many around the world. This dreadful action was the spark that brought the world together to chant, “Black Lives Matter.”

Statement of the problem:

This study investigated and explored the impacts of COVID-19 and the racially charged protests and worldwide uprisings in response to George Floyd’s death and its effects on critical mentoring for youth of color. As such, the report outlines the need for implementation strategies that focus on social emotional learning with an anti-racist lens to inform best practices for mentors.

Researcher’s Positionality Statement

Brana: As a recent graduate and Heinz Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh, my work has been centered around youth voices and their stories being heard. We created and co-founded an organization called QUEENS to enhance the educational experience for women of color. Our goal is to create space across the world for black girls to have a voice and create a sense of belonging in education. This mission has empowered me to pursue further learning alongside YMAN.

Marnitta: Mother. Wife. Nurturer. Teacher. I am a Black American. I am a Christian, yet I know that there has been much evil done in the name of Christianity. I am still learning myself within these spheres. I spend time in worship and I've committed my work as worship. This helps me to stay grounded and it keeps me centered when I feel that my energy isn't quite right. When I work and use my work as worship and praise, I feel like my energy is spent doing good in my world. As an educator for 15 years, I hope that my time spent and my time to come reflects equity, kindness, and opportunity for all of my students. However, it's become overwhelmingly clear as of late that no one exists in his/her own world. Our worlds are connected and we all have a pivotal role to play in nurturing the intersection of the worlds that we all hold dear.

Kimberley: As a Caribbean immigrant living in the land of opportunity, my positionality is characterized by the intersectionality of multiple identities. I identify as an Afro-Caribbean, cis-gendered able-bodied christian heterosexual female. My essence and experiences are owed solely to my creator, the most high GOD and that of my African, Jamaican, African-American ancestors and the elders in my family. These entities and their legacies, their triumphs, their failures and their sacrifices adorn my every being and allow me to negotiate and navigate the world with a unique set of abilities and lens. I have long had a passion for young people and their families, dedicating my personal and professional work to serving youth through servant leadership. My main objective has been to elevate the voices of young people and empower them to create and make change. Though an outsider to the Inland Empire region, it is my hope to build community while engaging in a reciprocal relationship where I can provide love, support and make a difference. My personal interest inspires me to work with and support The Youth Mentoring Action Network, bringing with me over 15 years of experience in youth advocacy.

YMAN Community Organization:

YMAN, the Youth Mentoring Action Network, is a youth-centered and youth-driven non-profit organization that works with and for the growth of youth in their community. Through partnerships and training opportunities with community partners, YMAN works to ensure youth are provided with strong mentors that seek to help them become change agents in their own communities. Through various outreach programs, YMAN works to focus on the need to pour into youth to help them thrive in environments and pockets of society that typically ignore or diminish the needs of youth. These outreach programs vary from physical activities including gardening and boxing, opportunities to build self-awareness and self-actualization, and interest/creative developmental programs with music and technology. Further, YMAN connects with other community organizations to provide educational opportunities for them to better connect with the youth populations that they serve. At the core of YMAN's vision, there stands the multi-layered connection between youth and their mentors so that they (the youth) can, in turn, give back to their community in the future.

Literature Review**Critical Mentoring**

The concept of youth mentorship is not a new idea, rather it is a long term philosophy defined as, "the caring relationship focused on the consistent support and positive development of a child or youth," and rooted in the age-old concept of mentoring (Weiston-Serdan & Sanchez, 2017). The field of youth mentoring has many critiques identifying persistent problems in the development of its theory regarding race, class, sexuality, gender, culture and language. This conceptual analysis highlights this problem, illustrating the inability of mentoring theory

and research to be fully inclusive and representative of the essence and experiences of youth of color and the many identities they bear (Cross, 1991).

Amidst the current state of the world, it is critical that educators and mentors are armed with the right resources in order to help young people to provide context and relief from the myriad of emotions they are experiencing as a result of COVID-19 and the uprisings. Critical mentorship is needed to further engage, represent and aid youth, as they navigate these experiences and events. **Critical Mentoring** is a framework that embeds critical race theory into mentoring; it openly considers race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality in the program design and mentoring relationship. In “Critical Mentoring: A Practical Guide,” Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017) propose a youth-centric framework for mentoring in which mentors and youth partner, not to change youth but to focus on the assets youth already possess to elevate their voice, power, and choice. Critical mentoring challenges eurocentric ideals of youth mentorship and calls for creating conditions where there is an examination of program structure, communication strategies, and personal biases to make sure mentors are not perpetuating oppressive systems. In addition to assessing biases and programmatic operations, critical mentoring celebrates the identities and explores issues that are relevant to mentee’s everyday lives.

COVID-19:

COVID-19 has prompted widespread school closures and physical distancing measures and made online platforms and communities essential to maintaining a sense of normalcy. Children and their families are turning to digital solutions more than ever to support children’s learning, socialization and play. According to the CDC (2020) April report titled, *COVID-19 and its Implications for Protecting Children Online*, COVID-19 has led to at least 188 country-wide

school closures and has impacted more than 90% of the world's student population. As such, many children's learning experiences are being reshaped by the sudden introduction of remote learning, including, if and where available, technology and virtual platforms as a substitute for the classroom and schoolyards. According to the National Mentoring Partnership in their Critical Mentoring Curriculum guide (TNMP, 2020), the following are some of the unintended consequences of the COVID-19 directives to shelter in place: Disconnection from school and the caring adults there; extracurricular activities; mentoring programming; cancelled social events or milestones (graduations, etc.) and potential losses and trauma. For many children of color and those in rural areas, these new developments have posed problematic issues concerning access and equity. The rapid shift to e-learning has educators learning new skills and in many cases are requiring schools and districts to line up access to devices or internet that students may not have at home, (Barack, 2020). As students contend with access, equity and loss, there are many processes through which e-mentoring and critical mentoring can facilitate positive gains or personal growth for youth by employing a critical lens. According to the "Critical Mentoring Curriculum" guide by the National Mentoring Partnership, the following are key to achieve that goal:

- Offsetting youth isolation and increasing feelings of belonging and connectedness.
- Providing access to high-level subject matter expertise.
- Increasing social support and feelings of self-efficacy.
- Increasing social capital and the building of networks.
- Offering mentees a safe space to share and process their feelings.

George Floyd & Black Lives Matter Protests

The racial policing and profiling in the black community has long been an issue that many community members have had to contend with. Recently, the nation has been rocked by protests in the weeks since another unarmed black man from Minneapolis, George Floyd, died after an officer, responding to a call at a corner store, held him down on the ground with a knee to his neck for eight plus minutes while he yelled out, “I can’t breathe” and called for his deceased mother. In solidarity, demonstrators around the world took to the streets and demanded the officers involved be arrested and charged with murder. As such, many students and young people have been integral in speaking up and helping to raise awareness regarding the black struggle and existence, the constant dealings of oppression, racism and discrimination, calling for strategic and systematic change. Oppression can limit marginalized persons in various domains of their lives (e.g., educational) and can have negative psychological effects (Case & Hunter, 2012). As such, young people have been deeply impacted and mentors are needed now more than ever to give voice and dimension to the daily experiences of these students as they negotiate their multiple worlds and emotions dealing with COVID-19 and the protests/call for justice.

Critical mentorship is needed to assist youth in exploring how to communicate authentically and compassionately with each other and others about issues of race and how to heal the effects of trauma.

Social Emotional Learning

The Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) framework is used to help students develop interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. It is, in effect, the opportunity for students to practice skills in the classroom that can be transferred to situations that exist in and out of the classroom. It is based on five primary competencies: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-

making, social awareness, and relationship skills. However, many SEL programs do not address the needs of students who may be exposed to injustices such as “racism, poverty, and unemployment in their communities,” (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002). As such, the Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) framework should be applied to the SEL curriculum.

The SJYD model is built on three tenets: recognition of the environmental and social barriers that are present that cause harm to the well-being of youth. In other words, there has to be a clear conversation with students about the forces that exist in and around their communities that exist to reduce their opportunities for self-actualization. The second tenet is that youth need opportunities to heal from the hostility of their environments. With this, it is clear that students must not only recognize the forces, they must have the opportunity to come to grips with them and overcome them for themselves. Finally, the SJYD model gives students an opportunity to participate in change for their community through action (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002). This framework may guide community organizations’ curriculum as they seek ways to address students’ reactions to the events of the past few months (see intro for detailed list). Prothero (2020) advises educators to help youth focus on how they can help others during this time as a way to encourage the social-emotional learning process to help to reduce feelings of anxiety and the development of fight-or-flight. If students are given an opportunity to connect to these current events, instead of hindering their questions and reactions to what has happened, they will be better equipped to deal with the stressors of their environments.

To further develop the tenets of SJYD, especially in this post-COVID-19 age, as many educational institutions are still unsure about whether they will or will not reopen in the fall, there will need to be a renewed focus on the mentor relationship, especially if it is addressed digitally. Many students may feel disconnected from their mentors, digitally through zoom or

other social media platforms, so the intentional activities to build trust must be refined. Through a digital learning community project, Bowden (2015) explains that before students are given an opportunity to interact with technology, there should be a space for building relationships. It is the intentional pursuit of a relationship with students that allow them an opportunity to fully engage with the content and topic of discussion, while meaningfully exploring the digital learning environment. Nevertheless, this dynamic of a technology-based mentoring creates a major hurdle for youth workers. According to Martin (2019), many of the best practices educators use to build relationships in person can also be applied to online content. Mentors should create content so their mentees can see them in the videos. Additionally, there should be a forum for students to share their lives as they are comfortable.

It is through the intentional act of building relationships that will provide the best opportunity for youth to engage with and explore their reactions to the challenges of this time. The connection with mentors who care will be crucial to help youth to find their voice, especially during this time where there are competing voices in the media and in communities.

Anti-Racist Framework

Anti-Racist framework gives insight to how educators approach the educational dynamics and relational interactions inside and outside of the classroom. There is an increase in death rates, infections and hospitalization for people of color due to the COVID-19 virus. The systematic oppression that has existed for decades is only emphasized during the current pandemic. As an educational response to these circumstances, Wing (2020) states, “We must commit to teaching in a way that totally disrupts and dismantles the system of oppression.” As educators, partners, influencers and students, we must hold ourselves accountable for unlearning habits that contribute to systematic oppression while navigating spaces that we are in. It is an

acknowledgement that “racism is systematic, institutionalized, and structural,” (Ladson-Billings, 1994 & Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019).

No matter the role, inside or outside of the classroom, anti-racist practices must start from within. This begins by addressing racial biases, creating spaces for tough conversations, and supporting peers and colleagues who are willing to reflect and make change. The anti-racist framework also provides a guide to discover the diversity of the voices within personal institutional connections.

To be anti-racist in education there must be an inclusion of equitable literacy. Equitable literacy causes educators to recognize how their approach to learning has been in the past and how to look forward to more inclusive models in the future. Additionally, this is a recognition that the preconceived forms to celebrate diversity, reimagine kindness, teach grit and growth mindset, and cultural competence may sometimes reflect good intentions, but distort the vision of equality with the assumption that all students have equal access to resources and experiences. As long as POC fear for their lives, are marginalized, and misrepresented by society, there will always be a need for an anti-racist approach.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted through the use of research databases and current articles, webinars, and symposiums. There were no direct participants involved in this study.

Materials

The research team did not conduct a direct study, but instead relied on interpretative research methodology, therefore, the materials were limited to web-based research.

Design and Procedure

As all researchers are African-American women, associated with educational spheres of classroom facilitation and mentoring, each approached this research with affective sentiment. Each researcher shared a personal connection to the topic and passionately exchanged dialogue regarding the research findings. As each pursued this topic with individualized biases and experiences, each perspective was analyzed through a micro-lens of individualized topics, which may have impacted the findings of this study. The study was completed separately before being synthesized, therefore, each researcher shared findings through her own lens of interpretation.

The study design was based on interpretative methods using available research. The original goal of this data collection was to provide our research partners, YMAN, with relevant pedagogical approaches that responded to the needs of this current period: COVID-19 and heightened racial tension. The study relied on available research regarding Critical Mentoring and the Critical Race Theory (CRT). The research team sought to discover practical methods to guide mentors to be equipped to respond to their proteges' questions surrounding the current events, and help them to process their frustration, fears, and other feelings in a supportive manner.

The primary research question was, *What are best practices for youth organizations post COVID-19 and protests of police brutality against People of Color (POC)?* This response led the research team to search for best practices for social-emotional learning (SEL) and anti-racist education and training. With Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the primary lens, the research team hoped to capture strategies best suited for the population of students served by YMAN. The themes gathered from the research, trauma, wellness, and activism, were developed through a synthesis of the diverse perspectives. As the primary research was completed using already available primary and secondary sources, coupled with relevant and timely resources including webinars, blogs, and podcasts, the research evolved into an informational resource for educators and mentors.

The application and structure of the CRT served as a guide for the research to focus specifically on the issues that are most prevalent among youth as a response to COVID-19 and heightened racial tension. Additionally, the CRT framework led the research team to design specific solutions and strategies that would best fit YMAN's request for consumable materials for distribution to their partners. As the research evolved, the team prepared not only best practices, but informative resources for the partner organization to share, as needed.

Results

Multiple Forms of Trauma

Youth have been exposed to an indescribable amount of trauma during the research period of this study: March - July 2020. Although trauma is not a new psychological concept, it has gained traction in the educational sphere as educators seek to balance the emotive needs of

students with their academic needs. This section provides a brief overview of the traumas most relevant to the student population referenced through our research:

Impact of Trauma

The experience of trauma and suffering are longstanding and prevalent within communities of color, however, its effects are often ignored. According to the Missouri Department of Mental Health (DMH), trauma can be defined as any event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that can have lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional well being. Without delving into the specifics and nuances of developmental psychology regarding the stages of development, identity formation and social/physical maturation, researchers such as Perry (2000) and Vitelli (2013) indicate and support the notion that although stress is a normal part of life, when a child is exposed to chronic trauma, like abuse, neglect or racial victimization, the child's brain remains in a heightened pattern. Houry & Mercy (2019) explain that children, youth, and families with ACE exposures have a tremendous impact on their future violence victimization and perpetration, and carry lifelong health and opportunity risks. Perry (2000) further outlines that remaining in this heightened state, can change the emotional, behavioral and cognitive functioning of the child, in order to maintain and promote survival. Over time, these traumatic experiences may have a significant impact on a child's future behavior, emotional development, mental and physical health. Ginwright (2016), describes that although PTSD was originally attributed to soldiers who were traumatized by the ravages of war, more recently, scholars have recognized that conventional PTSD simply fails to capture the complexity and ongoing nature of trauma commonly experienced by youth of color in urban communities. This phenomena is labeled as 'complex trauma' (p.19-20).

Social Media Trauma

Thanks to the advent of social media outlets like Tik-Tok, Instagram, and SnapChat, youth have access to information on any topic that they are interested enough to type in the search bar. To add, their news feeds possess an infinite amount of information that they may not have been mentally or emotionally prepared to receive. As researchers hope to uncover the impact of these repeated exposures to trauma, there exists the invisible assailant: the impact of witnessing violence, and then, as for many youth today, witnessing it again via social media. Lauryn Mascarenaz (2016) contends that, “As children repeatedly witness violence, they are apt to have more intense reactions to another trauma. And for students who are already dealing with trauma at home or at school, these experiences layer on top of each other and can significantly impact their development.” Psychology Today reminds readers that this repeated exposure to images of violence, brutality, and literally witnessing the death of people of color may in turn develop into Continuous Traumatic Stress. This disorder may display its impact in a multitude of ways including: behavioural problems, poor impulse control, sleep problems, and the “it can’t happen to me” mentality. To add, the most alarming impact of Continuous Traumatic Stress is the desensitization to violence and the obsession with revenge (Vitelli, 2013).

Curricular Trauma

A recurring issue in education amongst students of color, educators, mentors and professionals is the racially-biased decisions made in curriculum. Decisions about whose story, picture, experience gets included as the “norm,” who gets lifted up and who gets left out. These barriers are best described as cultural racism - cultural images and messages that affirm assumed racial superiority (SPAN, 2005). As students enter the classroom they are learning more and more about the negative effects of slavery, and manifest destiny and how it has impacted the

lives of people of color. That original trauma is exacerbated whenever and wherever there is no safe place to heal from the correlation of America's history to present day existences.

Generational Trauma

Through a blog post, Dr. Neal Lester (2020) painfully recounts recent ills committed against African-Americans that have received the echo of the mass media. Through his platform, he tells a very quieting tale about the weight and associated pain of living in a society that overwhelmingly differentiates how citizens are treated based on race. The pain described by Lester does not stop with his generation. He acknowledges and illustrates the impact of generational trauma, which if not met through purposeful and intentional means, will continue to manifest itself throughout a family lineage and community. This theory is illustrated through the study conducted by Cohn and Morrison (2018) which posits that the trauma experienced by Holocaust victims transfers to the life experiences and identities of their grandchildren. Although not directly stated by Lester, his remarks echo the pain of his ancestors who survived slavery, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and as he now rests on the current social structure, he is pained and furious that American society continues to perpetuate ill towards people of color. Generational trauma creates a heightened response of fear, anger, or pain that is exacerbated by the current events.

Wellness

In response to the increased exposure to trauma, youth should be equipped with strategies to balance and overcome their pain. As such, educational institutions and youth-centric organizations will need to adapt curriculum to fit the needs of students. This section outlines the rationale for wellness education and provides strategies for implementation:

Educator/Mentor Self-Care

There is a need for educators/mentors to learn the effects that trauma and chronic stress have on the mind and body. Special attention is needed to understand stress and grief responses. Educators and mentors should not only employ strategies for self care, they should also share their resources to help young people find balance and light through these unprecedented moments. Educators would be remiss if they do not recognize that in these unprecedented times, there is a teachable moment to participate in a reverse critical mentorship relationship with mentees and students. This opportunity would provide collective post-traumatic growth resources largely developed through the student perspective.

There should be health and wellness coaching for young and old who participate in social justice work in order to develop sustainable self-care plans. There is often a stigma associated with mental health, therefore, safe spaces designed to let go of fear must be nurtured to create a space that is authentic and be free of judgement. This is also fostered through sharing personal stories which guide resiliency. As social justice efforts are pursued, the act of storytelling creates opportunities to connect and recognize the intersectionalities of all communities (Lorde, 2017; Hooks, 1994 & Pyles, 2018).

Social Justice Social-Emotional Learning

Students are traumatized. Yet, most lack the vocabulary to fully articulate their actual emotions and their roots, many do not trust the adults at their school sites or are unable to express their emotions, yet they continue to have exposure to the trauma that they cannot escape.

Students need and deserve the opportunity to thoughtfully engage in discussion to debate and deliberate on their spectrum of emotional intelligence, and how the awareness of it will impact their lives in and outside of the classroom. Youth particularly impacted by the amplified

injustices and inequalities facing communities of color will benefit from the blended lens of social and emotional learning that includes the Social Justice Youth Development framework as outlined by Gimwright and Cammarota (2002). This framework, supported by the Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as discussed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that this lens “not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate (469).

Activism

Young people desire an outlet to voice their responses. Although they are impacted by the events that surround them, there are also youth who desire to make positive change within and beyond their communities. Through providing students with authentic opportunities to engage with the issues that matter to them most, they fundamentally gain a willingness to participate in meaningful ways to form the world where they have access to thrive:

Student Voice

Youth should have a voice in the creation of curriculum and programming. By doing so, mentors and educators prioritize student-centered learning, which empowers students to be engaged. This is a key tenant in Critical Pedagogy and Student Centered Learning Theory, which characterizes and combines the reciprocal approach of providing students an opportunity to develop their own agency, and for educators to reflect on the experiences of the learner (McCarthy, 2015). Furthermore Critical Mentoring emphasizes the idea of “Youth Centricism” which most importantly translates theory into action. This exists with a shift in perspective: analyze the organizational structure through a youth-centric lens of their interests and their

ambitions. (Weiston-Serdan, 2017) These perspectives have the capacity to influence how the voices of youth contribute to the development of relevant pedagogy.

During the YMAN Black Youth Town Hall Forum (2020), the young scholars were asked, *'How can systems rise up to meet your highest healing potential? How can elders, adults, mentors and non-blacks support you?'* Their responses sent powerful shockwaves through the virtual space as voice after voice boasted their power and taught elders how to intently listen. Their message is echoed in this response by a brave youth speaker:

“Elevate our voices! We deserve to be heard authentically and our ideas for what they are and not to be diluted. Young people don’t want a seat at the table, we want our own table and chairs. We will invite you to our table. We are looking for adult allies who can get us into the rooms that we often get pushed out of and elevate our voices. We no longer want to be a generation that is seen and not heard. Let us in! Allow us to speak and support us with resources that we need for our vision.”

Social Media

The collective demonstration in which social media is playing a role in the critical conversation around race on social media can and should inform the practices that mentors and educators conduct inside or outside of the learning space. Young people are using social media as a space to think critically about race, politics, and general ideas that support their experiences in America. A activist blogger speaks about his ability to create a space for followers and no followers to ask questions and create the kind of dialogue that elevates his voice:

“I recently had a question and answer session on my Instagram, in which I encouraged people to submit their questions to me anonymously. The overall response to

it was crazy—I thought I was going to just answer like five or six questions, but I ended up spending almost an hour answering questions on the Black Lives Matter movement, where we're going from here, what does justice look like, and what dismantling the police force means. That was several days ago, and I still have people who are watching it and interacting with it and DMing me (Vaughn, 2020).”

Discussion

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and simultaneous civic outcry and civil protests occurring, mentoring programs have had to reimagine and reconfigure the way they conduct business and provide services. As such, they are grappling with how to create immediate and temporary scaffolding, while looking ahead to close the gaps and recover from COVID-19, in a way that is representative of the lived experiences and addresses the concerns of those they serve. As police brutality continues to plague society, as new young voices continue to rise calling out, “Black Lives Matter,” and as the resistance continues, youth will be front and center. Weiston (2015) states, “Many realize that existing practice often lacks the critical foundation required to serve the communities who need help most. Some are unsure about what steps to take, others unwilling to recognize that the shifting landscape requires bold and sweeping action, but all need to identify and implement more critical ways of doing our work if we truly mean to make a change.” As such, organizations such as YMAN will rally the cry, join forces and continue to lead the pack, implementing critical mentorship and an anti-racist framework, making the work more relevant and applicable to youth of color. There is a tremendous opportunity right now to step up in innovative ways for youth, but it is imperative that educators and mentors not cause harm or retraumatization. The aforementioned entities need to respond to social and political agendas relating to and of interest to young people and the youth services sector by providing proactive leadership and advocacy through an anti-racist lens, while empowering and engaging youth and placing focus on their social and emotional health. Young people should have opportunities to foster their own agency to stand up tall with pride, relish in their identities, their choices, and their communities without fear and trepidation.

The following recommendations are based upon the research findings:

- Teenagers may need mentor coaching to participate in healthy social media habits. They may not yet have the capacity to even put away their phones as a much needed detox from social media, and as a result, they face repeated trauma without the means to sort through their emotions.
- To value something goes beyond considering it as important; you also appreciate its qualities, while investing the time, energy, effort, and sacrifice necessary for its maintenance. We need to value and uplift our young people and hear them. Dr. Wizdom Powell (2020) shares, “The psychological and emotional weight of today’s experiences and the intergenerational transmission all this is occurring is ours.. If we as elders don’t deal with these racial injustices, our youth and children will be left to solve these problems for us and this limits their potential to grow, health and thrive.”
- Now, more than ever, schools must depend on their partnerships with the community, to build bridges to help guide students to a place of healing and security. There is a common phrase in education communities that follows the premise that educators must Maslow before we Bloom. This means that there is no way to address content standards and instruction if students’ physical and emotional needs are not met. At this time, the needs of our students are to ask questions, seek answers, and pursue their own paths to explore how to positively impact their environments to make lasting change.
 - Through a webinar hosted by EDWeb, Dr. Tiffany Gholson, LCSW, Director of Parent and Student Support Services from East Saint Louis School District, IL, shared her district's strategy for incorporating SEL into their back to school plans.

She echoed the importance for schools to engage in meaningful partnerships with the community (2020).

- Self-care is key: Patrice Hill, Health and Resiliency workshop co-facilitator states, “As we are consistently being there for students, trying to navigate our roles in the community, it is hard to keep going some days. We have our strength caps on and quite frankly some days we don’t want to have to be so strong all the time. Sometimes, I reserve the right to sit in the corner and cry,” (2020). This is a common sentiment shared amongst community workers who engage in this work because it is exhausting and confusing day to day. In order to be present for students, educators and mentors must show up for themselves.
- Anti-Racist teaching practices should be intentional, “teachers and administrators have to actively disrupt and interrupt racism every day in their leadership and their curriculum (Muhammad, 2020).”
- Social media can be used as a form of civic engagement and ultimately this type of activism, although not the traditional sphere, may be a necessary tool to shift society's future and create necessary conversations.
- Curricular infusion with the anti-racist lens is critically important to tackle racially-biased decisions made in curriculum. This pedagogical process offers a counter-narrative for the standard (Euro-centric) decisions about whose story, pictures, experience gets included as the “norm,” who gets lifted up and who gets ignored (Lauter, 1983).

Conclusion

Challenges:

The COVID-19 pandemic has put many local organizations such as YMAN in a bind, having to restructure their program while responding to the respiratory illness caused by the novel strain of the coronavirus. The pandemic poses challenges because restrictions on gatherings were imposed to slow the spread of the virus, and statewide stay-home order precludes all but essential activities, work and exercise. Mentorship and mentoring is an interpersonal effort and this has been deeply impacted by the cancellation of events, workshops and mentee/mentoring meetings. YMAN responded with virtual events and training and spaces to meet the needs of both their protegees and mentors.

This body of work was created as a product for a month long summer graduate course, EDUC574 - Community-based, Participatory Research: Focus on Transformative Movement Organizing at Claremont Graduate University where the three researchers are currently enrolled. If allotted more time or as part of a prolonged internship opportunity, the research would produce additional findings. Due to COVID-19, the researchers participated singularly through virtual programming and did not have an opportunity to meet all of the organization's staff, leadership and student participants. As such, the researchers did not have direct contact with students and only incorporated student voices via their participation in the virtually sponsored events.

Limitations:

The physical limitations of COVID-19 prevented us from completing further research to the topics that were discussed in this paper. The lack of in person interaction with our partner organization and respondents were limited to virtual Zoom meetings. With just five

weeks of class, the time constraints for conducting research played a role in our purpose and design. However, this research captures the essence of the directions we would like to take as researchers: utilizing social media and the pandemic to reconstruct learning to eliminate educational barriers through anti-racist framework, wellness related activities, social- emotional learning outcomes and objectives, and youth centered instruction. The voices of the students played a huge role in the direction of our research as educators. As researchers, we would have benefited from the opportunity to survey and hold small group discussions with youth about their current experiences and future recommendations for enhancing their educational environment.

Based on our location and circumstances of this moment, there is a possibility that the results may not be generalized to other times and geographic locations. These limitations notwithstanding, our findings may have important implications for how policymakers can best ensure educational institutions and mentoring programs are well equipped in the face of a crisis to handle the needs of its constituents. It might also be worthwhile for governments, schools and programs to track how student and parents beliefs and sentiments change over the course of the pandemic, and post once reopened. This would inform the need for-and help target-policy interventions.

Future Research:

Too often young people are either seen as a homogenous group, or by groups solely defined by their gender, age or ethnicity without appreciating anything more about who they are, who they identify with, and what really matters to them. As YMAN focuses their efforts on the intersectionality of the many identities of the students they serve, future research should ensure proper identity resolution that incorporates all self disclosed identities the student population bears. Additionally, some young people view school and mentoring programs as safe spaces due

to their experience of challenging situations at home such as abuse/neglect and lack of food. Now that they are forced to stay home, those challenges are magnified. Truly understanding young people and their needs is fundamental to promoting their success and wellbeing. Future research can outline these types of traumas and present practical solutions to address such lived experiences.

Critical Mentoring is a need in many communities across the country, especially communities of color impacted and weighted by the disparities of equity, safety, and access to educational opportunities. The Inland Empire is gifted with YMAN, yet this reciprocal relationship between mentors-students-educators is fundamental as it responds directly to the needs of the youth that it serves. Without this relationship access, students may feel helpless and hopeless, as their teachers may not have the skills or structural freedom to support their affective needs. School districts and other entities may strengthen their support for students with community based mentoring partnerships. Mentorship is characterized by relationships. Classroom teachers may be consumed by the politics of their positions, but the mentor is certainly critical as our students will be returning to an environment that will be different than they have ever known and they will need the guidance of a caring mentor to help them navigate their changing world.

Within this new sphere, mentors and mentee relationships are strengthened by a sharing of power and through the dismantling of hierarchical structures. This allows all involved to reimagine mentoring relationships and engage in reverse mentoring where all involved can learn from and support each other through these unprecedented times.

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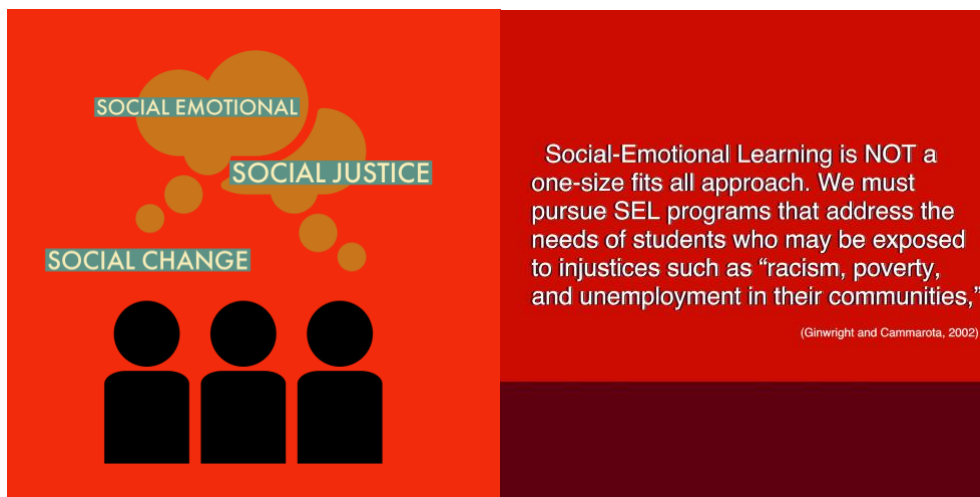
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Appendices

Instagram Post:



Social Emotional, Social Justice, Social Change Framework



Trauma



**TO BE
ANTI-RACIST**
in education we
must include
**equitable
literacy**

Equitable literacy
causes us to
recognize
how our approach
to learning
has been in the
past,
looking forward
to more
inclusive models
in the future.



Welcome

What forms of grief and trauma are you carrying in the 2020 season?

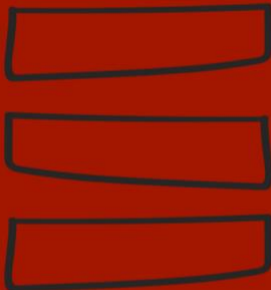
As a community, we are all grappling to make sense of the world and its happenings, so much so that we may forget that our young people grapple with the same reality, the reality that their very existence and that of their families and their communities are at risk.

“The recent events have been traumatizing and challenging physically, mentally and emotionally.”

James Hill
Black Youth Town Hall

**EMPOWER
STUDENT
VOICES**

YOUTH VOICES TO
FOLLOW AND SUPPORT



TO VALUE SOMETHING GOES BEYOND REGARDING IT AS IMPORTANT; YOU ALSO APPRECIATE ITS QUALITIES, WHILE INVESTING THE TIME, ENERGY, EFFORT, AND SACRIFICE NECESSARY FOR ITS MAINTENANCE. WE NEED TO VALUE AND UPLIFT OUR YOUNG PEOPLE AND HEAR THEM.