Reaching Back and Lifting Up: A Qualitative Research Study of Critical Mentoring in the

Inland Empire

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EDUC 574

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Introduction

Historically, mentoring relationships served to indoctrinate white, poor, urban youth with White middle-class values (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Contemporarily, DuBois and Karcher (2014) define a traditional mentor as a nonparental adult, not acting in a formal capacity, who offers guidance and support over a considerable period of time. As such, mainstream mentoring research focuses on traditional mentoring approaches, utilizing traditional, eurocentric research methods. However, as the field of mentoring has evolved to meet the needs of more diverse populations, scholars advocate for a move toward critical mentoring, which seeks to understand youth context and marginalization and attempts to address these issues through specific mentoring activities and interpersonal relationships (Weiston-Serdan & Sanchez, 2017). Our research team has a vested interest in the formal and informal support systems which support the success of girls and women of color due to our personal histories and research interests. As such, we will give context to this study by first recognizing our positionality.

I, Franchesca, live at the intersection of many privileges and oppressions that have shaped my values and make me who I am today. I come from a very diverse family, whose stories are heavily marked by migration. My father is Puerto Rican and Black and mother is Mexican. I spent the majority of my childhood in San Diego, CA in a middle class, diverse, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Black and white community. Many transitions, from moving to Chicago in the middle of high school to my undergraduate career at UC Irvine, have put me in positions where I experienced isolation and discrimination due to my cultural background. These experiences also allowed me to reflect deeply on my class privileges and have influenced my involvement in social justice organizing and work with youth in foster care. Given my cultural

background, educational experiences and current work with students in foster care, I am

interested in the outcome of this research as a way to understand how to better support students

who look like me and the students who I advocate for on a daily basis.

    I, Jenessa, grew up as a first generation Mexican-American in the Imperial Valley,

located on the border between Mexicali and the U.S. border. I spent the majority of my

childhood crossing between them daily to spend time with family members who did not have

U.S citizenship status. Navigating this as a young child gave me perspective of living in a

parallel universe. Being too young to understand my privilege, caused internal anxiety and guilt.

When I was nine years old, my family and I moved to Hemet, CA where my grandparents

migrated with other farm workers. While this was the town I grew up in, I never associated it as

being my *home*. Growing up in a rural community that was predominantly white had a deep

impact on my educational experiences. I struggled with my own self-identity since I was the only

Mexican in my entire group of friends and our family was a very traditional Mexican-Catholic

family. Upon my high school graduation I was told by my high school counselor that I "would

not succeed in an academic environment" and having conversations with my parents, and being

from a low income family, I never gave much thought to higher education, until much later in

life. It was not until I became pregnant with my first daughter Elliah that I realized that I needed

to go to school in order to find a better paying job. Although I still struggled with self-doubt, I

became the first person in my family to graduate from college. It was in these academic spaces

that I found my own mentors who helped to guide me on my journey, looked out for my

well-being and ensured that I was able to build my own community of support to sustain me in a

space that I felt was not created for me.

I am also a mother of two beautiful biracial daughters who have struggled with their own self-identities. I find myself wondering what their lives and educational trajectory will look like and whether there will be people that they can connect with should they choose to go to college one day. I began my research of race and racism and the impact they have on biracial female student educational attainment. While it was temporarily sidelined while I received my Master's degree, I understand the need to continue my research as a Ph.D. student. This journey has been very personal and emotional as I share with my own immediate family the support systems and lack thereof for women of color. I hope that through this research I will have a much better platform to understand the positionality and theoretical frameworks that we have been studying over the course of this class.

While our personal stories are sprinkles with mentors who have supported our educational trajectories, we have found that mentoring research has been slow to catch up to these trends. Part of this lull is due to the fact that diverse communities often engage in informal mentoring relationships outside of formal programs, making them difficult to study. As such, these relationships remain ambiguous to the mentoring field. In an effort to fill this gap we collaborated with the The Youth Mentoring Action Network (YMAN), a mentoring organization which utilizes mentoring as a tool to create a more equitable society for youth (YMAN, 2019). In collaboration with YMAN, we conducted a study which seeks to understand the formal and informal mentoring experiences of women of color. The principal research questions are:

1) What does mentoring practice look like for women of color?

2) In what ways does mentoring impact women of color?

Aside from filling a gap in research, this study seeks to illustrate the need for further research on how communities of color engage in mentoring and illuminates the need to invest in more mentoring resources for girls of color. Additionally, this research will help mentoring researchers and practitioners better understand how to work with girls and women of color.

As emerging community based researchers, with limited time to complete our project, we did our best to analyze and report back findings that will provide helpful insight to YMAN and their partnerships in the Inland Empire. We sought out women of color, and specifically Black women in the community, who have served as a mentor or had been mentored by other women of color. We utilized a combination of our own research questions and those provided to us by YMAN to gain an understanding of their relationships with other women. We had nine individuals that responded to our survey which provided rich data and allowed a deeper insight of their experiences and why it was important for them to share their stories, as well as why they are deeply invested in giving back to their communities.

The following paper illustrates the educational context of girls of color in public schools, the voices and perceptions of our nine participants and final conclusions. The first section is our literature review, which explores past research and literature giving context to the need for mentoring among girls and women of color, particularly the challenges facing this population in the education system. The following section will provide an overview of methods, research sample and tools. The final sections will outline our results and sum up their significance to the mentoring and education fields as well as provide areas of growth for further research.

Literature Review

This research seeks to explore the impacts of formal and informal mentoring relationships on the lives of girls and women of color. Much of the literature on youth mentoring focuses on traditional forms of mentoring, which according to Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017), typically prioritize academic outcomes such as attendance, grades and discipline. However, as awareness is raised around the issues of equity in mentoring, and in education in general, research is catching up to the needs and experiences of communities of color. As such, the following literature review will examine seminal pieces of literature on the educational experiences of girls of color, giving rise to the need for critical mentoring, a term coined and developed by Dr. Torie Weiston-Serdan. Additionally, we will examine some of the limited literature on critical mentoring and how it stands as one of the many potential vehicles for educational justice.

While the American education system is often viewed as impartial and constructed for the advancement of all, the literature centering the experiences of children of color tells a different story. A common thread in this literature is the understanding that schools are toxic spaces, built on the suffering of children of color with the goal of assimilation. Educational spaces are particularly harmful for girls of color as they sustain the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes of girls of color, a reality that is rarely explored in academia. Dr. Bettina Love describes American education as being "anchored in White rage," (Love, 2019, 22). Historically, schools were intended for the education of White, rich men. As communities of color struggled for the right to educate their children on their terms, they were met with hostility and violence of Indian boarding schools, school segregation and the outlawing of languages other than English in

schools. All of these practices served the purpose of assimilating communities of color and

maintaining White supremacy (Love, 2019). Love (2019) argues that this legacy is upheld by

more recent policies and practices such as No Child Left Behind and the charter school

movement. These conditions create what Love has termed the "educational survival complex," in

which schools facilitate first interactions with systems of oppression and children become

accustomed to criminalization and marginalization (Love, 2019). As such, Morris (2016), Blake,

Epstein and Gonzalez (2017), and Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017) agree that schools are

sites of dominance which reproduce the status quo of race, class and gender inequalities while

suppressing, shaming and traumatizing youth of color. Morris (2016) contends that schools

reproduce inequalities by reinforcing harmful stereotypes of girls of color, specifically Black

girls, as ghetto, loud and confrontational. While Morris (2016) redefines these attributes as

manifestations of resilience, and resistance to mistreatment, she recognizes that educators

conceptualize them differently. Morris (2016) contends that when Black girls challenge authority

and advocate for themselves, they are viewed as wild, problematic and threatening. In turn, these

girls are marked as less deserving of support and are harshly punished for their transgressions.

Further to this point, Blake and Epstein (2017) assert that these stereotypes characterize girls of

color as unlady-like according to the standards of white femininity, and that their punishment is

an effort to force their conformity.

Furthermore, many researchers have found that Black girls in particular suffer from

adultization, which leaves them even more vulnerable to discipline. As Black girls are frequently

obligated to assume responsibilities, such as caretaking and wage earning, they are viewed as

fully developed adults (Blake & Epstein, 2017). Consequently, Black girls are commonly treated

as if they should behave more maturely and viewed as requiring less protection from adults. Because Black girls are interpreted as more adult-like, they are given fewer opportunities to make child-like mistakes, resulting in more frequent and harsh school discipline (Blake & Epstein, 2017). As a result of stereotyping and adultification, Black girls constitute 54 percent of girls with one or more out-of-school suspensions nationwide (Morris, 2016). Suspendable offenses include sleeping in class, advocating for themselves, asking questions, wearing natural hair and revealing clothing (Morris, 2016). The researchers outlined here illustrate a crisis in our education system where girls of color are being forcefully excluded from schooling and denied a just education, the results of which can be unemployment, homelessness, and even incarceration. As such, solutions and interventions for girls of color can be a matter of life or death.

The impact of our broken education system has harmful consequences on the life outcomes of girls of color, and communities of color in general, thus change is imperative. However, Morris (2016) and Love (2019) agree that a mere reformation of the education system and a redistribution of resources is not sufficient. Love (2019) asserts that efforts to reform schools by introducing new pedagogical techniques are futile, as pedagogy alone cannot resolve the systems of oppression and barriers facing students of color. Love (2019) advocates for a change in pedagogy in conjunction with grassroots organizing, involving families, students and teachers to push for social change. Morris (2016) attests that educators need to evaluate the relationships that are promoted, supported and harmed in schools, as an alternative to the exclusionary discipline policies often wielded against girls of color. Furthermore, Love (2019), Morris (2016) and Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017) all assert that efforts to improve schooling cannot resort to respectability politics, which often falls into false claims that

assimilation is synonymous with success, which justifies policing clothing, attitude and language.

While Love and Morris focus their energies exploring strategies to restructure the education system as a whole, Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017) employ an approach which concentrates on the students: Critical Mentoring. The term was coined by Dr. Torie Weiston-Serdan (2015) and the practices are as follows:

1. Mentoring that fully considers race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality when building the infrastructure for programs. Including programmatic structure, recruiting of mentors, training of mentors, support of mentoring relationships, mentoring activities and finally, target outcomes

2. Mentoring that is focused on critical consciousness and transformation rather than assimilation and adaptation

3. Mentoring that places emphasis on the whole community, the whole protégé, rather than just parts of the whole

4. Mentoring that includes, from its very inception, the needs of the community and the needs of the youth in the community (not about us without us)

5. Mentoring that promotes and supports mentor/protégé partnerships for community transformation

The act of mentoring, specifically as a Black mentor to Black female mentees or engaging in intergenerational dialogue such as Weiston-Serdan's "Sistah Circles," has the potential to be mutually empowering. Women of color and Black women are often the subjects of internalized oppression which develops at a young age. When youth have mentors who share the same

backgrounds, stories or other similarities, internalized oppression can vocalized in a safe space where words are heard and validated. As mentors assume such a crucial role in the lives of young people, it is important to be mindful of one's positionality as they make a conscious choice to take on that role. However, YMAN strives to maintain the individual's sense of self or identity by rejecting Eurocentric ways of fitting in and stereotypes of being viewed as problematic or threatening. As Berila states, oppression creates deep trauma so it makes sense that disrupting oppression and healing from it requires more than political and intellectual process; it also requires embodied ones. (2018, 9)

Critical Mentorship has the ability to play an integral role in the lives of those most marginalized, in this instance, Black women. Society has been conditioned to discredit our youth by assuming that since they are young that they do not have anything to offer. The "*millennial*" stereotypes are often depicted as individuals only caring about instant gratification via social media and or that they do not want to work hard in order to succeed. There stereotypes are compounded by the stress that students and women of color (Black/African Americans) manage, stemming from their home lives. The goal of critical mentoring is to connect youth with and adult confidant from their own community who cares and is willing to work in unison to help students reach their goals. Having an outside resource to share their vulnerabilities in safe spaces will allow for critical dialogue of the intersecting struggles that youth face, including oppression due to racial, economic, gender and sexual identity. This is illustrated by Shepard (2018, 15) who argues that organizations that imagine and implement a culture of wellness, with attention to the role of supervision, support, and peer mentoring, can play a part in changing the culture.

Consequently, addressing the needs of those who seek mentorship and human connections can

help them to thrive. Pyles further exemplifies this importance:

> Despite the trauma of violence, poverty, and racism, human resilience emboldens people
>
> to continually create inspiring communities and culture; resist the forces of oppression
>
> through protest, organizing and advocacy; and take care of one another understanding
>
> this notion that people have the collective power to shift the power dynamics that have
>
> kept people oppressed and feeling powerless and we can break these cycles of
>
> conditioning that have kept our communities feeling overwhelmed, and oftentimes
>
> defeated (2018,6).

The anticipated outcome of these relationships is that youth will understand that they have the

power to build a healthier society which will lead to healing and resilience. This is especially

important in a world that has left many Black/African Americans feeling disconnected and

disenfranchised from society and their communities. Meeting the basic needs of Black youth in

particular is not viewed as a worthy investment by those in power, as systemic oppression and

racism goes far beyond the internalized notions of equity to all. When people of color,

specifically Black people, are able to create and sustain bonds with youth and serve as mentors, it

is a powerful tool of transformation for individuals and our society as a whole (Drewis, 2018).

As we have learned through this course, teaching and working with individuals on

various ways to alleviate *stress* can come in different forms such as journaling, art, music,

exercise and breaking bread while having healthy conversations with one another. These simple

tasks can make a world of difference in one's life and despite the fact that *self-care* is still a

foreign concept in our industrialized and fast paced world. Allowing spaces where there is reciprocity in teaching one another and making human connections that address our traumas has the potential to break generational cycles of pain. Pyles contends that,

> In order to begin to unhook from habitual unconscious patterns that can aggravate chronic stress, practitioners can cultivate mindfulness through self-awareness of feelings, thoughts, situations, and responses and that they believe that the ideas of self care do not exist (2018, 37).

As such, it is important that critical mentors integrate healing practices as part of their daily lives to sustain their own well-being throughout the mentoring relationship. Additionally, mentors, formal and informal, should continue to focus on *lifting* students up as opposed to silencing their voice, their traumas and policing their actions. Critical dialogue needs to happen authentically and time for reflection and healing needs to be incorporated into our daily narrative to sustain a sense of peace when up against statistical odds. The true power lies within the strength that is built through mentor and mentee relationships, respect for one another and the energy of these relationships. As Weiston-Serdan reaffirms throughout her research:

> If young people's contexts were water and air, it would be impossible to breathe and impossible to drink. The critical mentoring process aims to address this. Youth work must move to clear the water and purify the air. It is not about using youth programs to manage symptoms, but leveraging them to address the root causes (2017,15).

Unless we continue to disrupt the oppressive systems at play in our educational institutions, our students will never be given the space to heal from the trauma and disconnect they experience in

merely trying to survive. Part of this healing comes with having spaces to share pain, joy, successes, failures, disappointments, dreams and hope for their future without fear of judgement.

This literature is vital to understanding the impact of formal and informal mentoring relationships on Black women and women of color. The researchers and academics cited here give context to the experiences of Black girls and girls of color in our education system, a population which is often neglected by educators, service providers and academics alike. This research gives rise to the question, "what now?" How do we attempt to alter the toxic educational spaces that Black girls and girls of color inhabit every day? The literature reminds us that gaining the necessary resources for a just education in communities of color, specifically Black communities, will always be a structural challenge. While these researchers have many ideas and theories for educational change, there is little research on the steps that students, families, educators and academics are taking to create this change for our youth. Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017) provide much needed tangible solutions. They remind us that we are living in a pivotal time where movements, led by youth, to provide spaces and *critical mentors* to our Black and Brown youth should be at the forefront of discussion. Critical mentoring is an ideal method to utilize the breadth of wealth and knowledge that lies within communities of color for the empowerment of coming generations.

Methodology

For this project we were given the option to work with a number of community organizations in the inland empire engaged in social justice work. Our research team chose to work with the Youth Mentoring Action Network (YMAN), which engages in one-on-one and group mentoring. YMAN incorporates programs such as STEM and music mentoring, to give

support and resources to aspiring musicians, and Organize the IE, to teaching community

organizing skills (YMAN, 2019). YMAN also organizes events, such as Black women healing

circles, with the goal of creating intergenerational dialogue and build community (YMAN,

2019).

As women and educators of color, we are interested in YMAN's work for different

reasons. I, Franchesca, am of Afro-Latinx heritage and primarily interested in the educational

resistance of girls of color in the foster care system. I am also interested in how adult

relationships impact academic outcomes of girls of color. I, Jenessa, being the mother of two

Black and Mexican daughters, have experienced how racial dynamics have made positive and

negative impacts on my children. I also understand the importance of critical mentorship and that

a village of support is key to an individual's well-being. Additionally, I believe in the importance

of finding healthy ways to navigate one's academic experience while sustaining their own mental

health. Our positionalities and led to our investment in YMAN's work and participation in this

research.

In the process of designing this study, we were able to connect with members of the

organization, including one of the founders, Torie Weiston-Serdan. Torie, in turn, connected us

with Adan, a former youth member of YMAN who went on to become a staff member for the

organization. Adan helped us to gain a deeper insight into YMAN's mission and programming,

and attempted to help us shape our research project in Torie's absence. We also connected with

two youth participants and audio/visual experts, who volunteered to collaborate with us in

turning our research project into a podcast for the organization. These interactions enabled us to

witness the dedication to YMAN's mission cultivated by staff and youth members. It became

quickly apparent that YMAN genuinely strives to accomplish their mission of building youth

capacity and leadership skills. However, despite these enlightening interactions, we encountered

a number of setbacks which required us to change the course of our research.

The original research plan included utilizing Black feminist thought and Black feminism

in qualitative research to gather accounts of Black women and girls to decipher how they

understand and define mentoring relationships. This is a vital facet of the research process as

Black feminist thought stresses the significance of Black women and girls in the construction of

knowlege (Hill-Collins, 1989). In an effort to disrupt the standard eurocentric methods of

conducting mentoring research, we agreed to facilitate a series of dyadic interviews with Black

women and girls in the community to obtain a co-constructed understanding of mentoring.

However, a number of miscommunications and delays prevented us from conducting the

research as previously planned. Because we were unable to obtain contact information of

interviewees specified by the organization in a reasonable timeframe, we were forced to change

course.

With the intention of maintaining the integrity of the original theoretical frameworks, we

moved forward with our own research tool and sample, however we now lacked sufficient time

to conduct interviews and focus groups. Consequently, we created an online survey which we

distributed to our research participants by email. The survey contained questions developed both

by YMAN and the research team. To build our sample, we reached out to our own networks

women of color in our communities, specifically to women who we knew had either been a

mentor or had been mentored by other women of color. Out 14 women contacted, 9 women of

diverse cultural and educational backgrounds completed the survey. The words and perspectives

of these women are included throughout the findings with the use of pseudonyms. Participants

ranged in age from 25-50 years old and all identified as either Black or Chicanx. Educational

attainment among our participants ranged from completion of a Bachelor's degree to current

enrollment in a course of graduate study. All of the participants recount having been mentored in

the past and all but one has been a mentor to others. Regardless of the complications which

transpired at the beginning of the research process, we were able to adapt to new circumstances

and adjust our research plans when necessary. These characteristics, we have learned, are

required when engaging in community based participatory research.

Results

Through analysis of the data we have identified four main themes in women of color

mentoring experiences. These themes include: 1) the facilitation support systems for personal

and professional success, 2) mentoring relationships lift up mentees emotionally and

professionally 3) community responsibility as the impetus for becoming a mentor, and 4)

mentees are often inspired to reach back and support others. We found these themes to align with

the literature on women and girls of color in education. Additionally, we found these themes to

be significant to understanding mentoring relationships among women of color and how these

relationships impact women's lives.

Theme 1: Support systems for success

Every participant in the study identified mentoring, whether formal or informal, to be an

impactful experience on their lives, regardless of which side of the mentoring relationship they

experienced. It became apparent that participants who had been mentored felt that this

relationship facilitated a system of support through personal, academic and professional

challenges. Participants characterized their relationships as friendships, "which become serious when needed." Furthermore, when asked to describe their relationship with their mentor or mentee, individuals used words like, "sisterhood," "mother-mentor," "advisor," and even "village." These key phrases and sentiments were found across the board, regardless of whether the mentoring relationship was intergenerational or transpired amongst peers. Additionally, these sentiments were found regardless of the setting in which the relationship was formed, whether in the community, through a mentoring organization, or professional/academic setting. Digging deeper into these sentiments, led us to deduce that, in order for these relationships to be impactful, they required a level of trust and emotional support, attributes not often found in professional or academic settings, especially for women of color. These aspects of the mentoring relationship have been identified by scholars as vital to the mentoring processes for marginalized communities. Dubois and Karcher (2014) identify essential elements of the relationship to include guidance, support and interpersonal relationships. Jordan, who had been mentored by a professor throughout her academic career identified a mentor as, "Someone who is supportive, who can provide positive feedback, who makes you realize your talents." Moreover, Dubois and Karcher (2014) recognize that meaningful mentoring relationships sustained over a significant period of one's life provide a consistent base of trust, support and respect. These are key precursors to enhancing the growth in a mentoring relationship (Dubois and Karcher, 2014.) These aspects are found in the participants' reflections of their own relationships. Brenda, who had been mentored by colleagues in her profession, was provided with guidance in her personal life, which well outside of the official scope of her relationship with her mentors. She states that

"They have acknowledged my difficult choice to stay in LA and let go of a long-term

relationship. They've provided emotional support during that time."

These responses demonstrate that mentoring relationships between women of color which

are most impactful are those in which the mentor goes above and beyond to provide emotional

support and foster confidence in their mentees. This is salient, as these are not luxuries often

afforded to girls and women of color, in educational or professional environments. Stereotypes

of girls and women of color deemed as more open to criticism and less deserving of protection

(Love, 2019). Our participants responses demonstrate that mentoring can provide the protection,

trusting relationships and brave spaces they may have been lacking.

Theme 2: Lifting up academically, professionally and emotionally

The ability for mentors to provide a support system for their mentees enables these

relationships to lift up mentees emotionally and professionally. Our participants identified many

instances in which mentors utilized their life, academic or professional experiences to help

navigate difficult situations and build confidence. Sasha exemplifies this in her testimony of

mentoring experienced through the National Association of Black Accountants. Sasha reflects,

> [mentoring] reassured me that while Black women are a minority in the CPA profession,
>
> I can continue to be successful in a white male dominated industry, without
>
> compromising my identity or integrity. I pass the same school of thought on to my
>
> mentees.

Furthermore, Nicole, who was mentored by a college professor, adds "I believe I gained a great

deal of practical insight into how to be successful in higher education. So it made me more

confident and better prepared for the university experience." Nicole recognizes that having a

mentor helped to build self-assurance and better prepared for her journey through higher education.

Beyond providing support to help participants feel more comfortable in their academic and professional settings, our participants demonstrate that effective mentors have been willing to leverage their own social and cultural capital to help their mentees succeed. Linda, who previously managed a mentoring organization, touches on this matter in her interview,

> Black and brown girls thrive when they have positive examples. I care deeply about this both personally and professionally. I want to provide resources and outlets for Black and brown girls so that they can have access and opportunities that will enhance their own lives.

Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017) describe this process as opportunity brokering, wherein individuals utilize their own capital to provide those with fewer opportunities access to spaces and institutions that would otherwise be out of reach. Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017) recognize that the mentoring relationship has a great deal of power to change life, academic and professional paths. As such, the researchers advocate for culturally relevant mentoring practices and between individuals of similar backgrounds, allowing mentors and mentees to share culturally specific knowledge, and prepare for success in school, work and society (Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez, 2017).

The ability of mentoring relationships to life up mentees in vital in the face of oppressive educational systems, seemingly set on suppressing girls of color. Love (2019) characterizes the U.S. public education system being predicated on brown and Black suffering, creating an educational survival complex in which schools prepare students for a life of marginalization and

exhaustion. Our participants were not explicitly asked to describe their experiences in K-12

education. However, their responses indicate that they had previously lacked the confidence,

skills and opportunities necessary to thrive in higher education systems and professional settings

which reproduce the same marginalization as the primary and secondary education system.

Nevertheless, the participants' reflections on their mentoring experiences exhibit that critical

mentoring can be a countermeasure against the educational survival complex. While critical

mentoring alone will not solve all the problems of public education, our participants demonstrate

that mentoring can provide resources and support to resist a life of exhaustion and

marginalization.

Themes 3 & 4: Community responsibility and reaching back

A combination of personal testimonies and participant responses shed light on factors

which inspire individuals to become mentors. Some are motivated by a sense of responsibility to

their communities. Yet, others are influenced by their own mentors to reach back and lift up

younger generations of women.

I, Jenessa, took part in a conversation between a great-grandmother and her

granddaughter as she shared the story of their family history on how they transitioned to life in

the United States during the Jim Crow era. She shared that despite the fact that "no one in their

neighborhood had a high paying job" and had "very little education" that "everyone took care of

one another". Every family lived in poverty, yet she witnessed firsthand, the strength that lies

within her community from an asset-based approach and that people exemplified what it meant

to be a *mentor* without ever being assigned that title.

She stated that everyone understood that in order to sustain a stable home environment it was vital to take responsibility for their community, every day. This included ensuring that when a parent or family member was away at work, someone was looking out for their children, specifically the Black children. As she looked out into the distance, the great-grandmother shared how she wished that things were still that way. She did not want to worry so much about what her future great-grandchild's life would be like knowing that she was a woman of color, who face many challenges in school and has very few role models in her life. The old saying of it taking a *village* to raise a child is something that has always resonated deeply with me and what I have come to understand as the premise of *critical mentoring*.

In 1962, Malcom X stated that "The most disrespected women in America, is the Black Woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black Woman. The most neglected person in America, is the Black Woman." X's quote illustrates how necessary, powerful and impactful it is for Black women to have support systems and how *reaching back* will only continue to strengthen the cycle of having strong Black women looking out for the younger generations. Research has shown that all individuals need spaces of healing so that they feel safe, heard, empowered, understood. These spaces are vital for Black women and women of color to speak candidly about the systemic oppression they battle without the fear of judgement, alienation or retaliation from their outside communities. Finding adequate and meaningful support through mentorship serves individuals on multiple levels and as participant Sasha mentions mentorship as being "an opportunity for me to gain insight from someone who's been where I am and wants to help make the path a little clearer. The same can be said about what I strive to provide to my mentee." (2019)

Participants shared how their lives have been altered by their mentoring relationships. While sometimes these relationships were painful, our participants grew from being in the mentor and mentee role. Many of the participants have also come to understand their own responsibilities of *other mothering* which "signifies the unique relationship of an older Black woman who serves as a caregiver and motherly figure to a younger person in a specific setting (James, 1993b)." These relationships allow safe spaces for traumas to be addressed and for mentors to encourage self-care, academic or for professional growth. Studies have shown that when a person shares the same or a similar ethnic and cultural background and are able to find a commonality between one another intergenerational dialogue occurs more authentically (Weiston-Serdan & Sanchez, 2017). Intergenerational relationships among those of similar backgrounds allow for restorative and healing justice to occur, especially for youth who often feel that their voices are left out of their own narratives due to race and racism. Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017) state,

> Shifting that narrative to include youth voice and communicating collaboration and partnership in mentoring rather than youth need and adult saviorism challenges existing notions about what mentoring is and makes it more attractive for young people who avoid mentoring to avoid being further marginalized.

Linda illustrates Huff's sentiments exactly when she states that,

> I think like most things, Black women feel a heavy weight or responsibility to carry their communities and mentoring young people is a part of that. My mentees are like my baby

sisters or my daughters. It's so much more than getting them into college or helping them

learn how to write a resume. It's supporting them in surviving and thriving. (2019)

Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez found that same race mentoring matches can be especially

powerful for young people who have few mentors or suffer from internalized racism

(Weiston-Serdan & Sanchez, 2017). Same race mentors can connect to their mentees and guide

them in ways that others may not be able to. Linda further emphasizes this importance when she

recognizes that, "Black and brown girls thrive when they have positive examples. I want to

provide resources and outlets for Black and brown girls so that they can have access and

opportunities that will enhance their own lives."

In a society that adultifies Black girls and stigmatizes them as angry and hypersexualized,

community resistance and responsibility is critical to their well-being recognition of self-worth.

Blake and Epstein (2017) state that,

Adults attempt to change Black girls' behavior to be more passive. Such attempts to

ensure that Black girls conform with traditional white norms of "ladylike" behavior send

Black girls the message that they should be less visible, toned down, and take up less

space. These norms are enforced through school discipline as well as within

communities.

Several of the participants shared that they have a deep investment in their communities and

recognize their positionality as they are often the only Black person or person of color at their

job or in the classroom. As such, one participant, Eve recognizes that their role empowers them

to "speak up in spaces where I feel the presence of (trans) people of color are either silenced or

needed." (2019)

Members of under resourced communities will always find challenges to having adequate funding to advocate on behalf of women of color and Black women. While this may appear to be a barrier that needs to be overcome, the most valuable and often untapped resource will always lie within these same communities. When asked to contemplate her mentorship role, Eve mentions that,

> this relationship has enhanced my ability to understand certain concepts in my public service and community solutions coursework. I also feel the need to do better now that I am in a leadership position within this organization and working to become a more educated and advanced social servant.

The study participants demonstrate that critical mentorship allows people to build together, share their wisdom, their errors, their vulnerabilities, their failures, and their strengths. These relationships bind women of color and Black women together through their intergenerational dialogue and connections, impacting their everyday lives.

Conclusion

The limited literature on women and girls of color, specifically Black girls, paints a disheartening picture of our public education system. Seminal researchers on the experiences of girls of color in educational spaces have found that our schools and educators continuously harm the spirits of female students through racist policies and behavior. However, critical mentoring and organizations like YMAN prove to be a beacon of hope. Participants in this study demonstrate that mentors, and their mentees, engage in the hard work of community building and empowerment, which has lasting impacts both on individuals and their overall communities.

While the study we conducted provided us with rich data on these relationships and outcomes, we have come to realize that there is much more information that could have discerned from our participants. Future studies should reach a wider network of participants and have separate questions for those who have served in mentor and mentee roles, as opposed to combining them as we did. Additionally, a future study would benefit from gaining an understanding of participant's K-12 educational experiences, such as experiences with oppression. Lastly, a future study would benefit from attempting to gain a better grasp on the tangible ways in which critical mentoring addressing systems of injustice.

While we recognize that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in regard to providing Black women spaces of growth through mentorship, it has been uplifting to know that scholars such as Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez that have dedicated their lives to meeting the needs of Black youth/students of color as they collaborate to make connections while also recognizing that authentic love, investment in your community and critical dialogue is an integral part of the mentor/mentee relationship.

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Appendix

Our informed consent form, survey and survey responses can be found at:

https://forms.gle/1izuAGQViMHUskGi6