The development of a youth mentoring program in South India

Abstract

This article illustrates the challenges and opportunities involved as a US-based research team assists in the development of a culturally-informed youth mentoring program in rural India. Based on data from youth and adult stakeholders, a mentoring curriculum was developed and piloted. Lessons learned illuminate how context influences youth development programs and conceptualization of mentoring relationships. Implications for similar international initiatives are discussed.

Key words: Mentoring, India, Positive Youth Development

Introduction & Literature Review

The area of positive youth development (PYD) has been identified in the United States over the last two decades as a prominent youth program model (Larson, 2006). As a perspective, PYD focuses on identifying areas of youth motivation and ways by which youth can explore their potential, often with the support of non-parental adults. Within the field of PYD, mentoring as a specific intervention has increased in popularity, particularly in terms of mentoring youth in schools (Herrera et al., 2007) or other community settings. These youth-adult partnerships are associated with a variety of benefits for youth, including engaging in meaningful activities, exposure to the work world, and exercising responsibility.

Although mentoring programs identified within the literature span over 20 countries (Liabo et al., 2005), research to date tends to be restricted to America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand (Evans et al., 2005). The conceptual premise, which places priority on the influence of an individual (mentor) on the life of another (protégé), has expanded in recent years to accommodate a more collectivist culture (such as that of India) to include a system of supportive adults (Keller, 2005). Given this lack of international research in the area of mentoring, however, it is not surprising that conceptually informed papers highlighting the

importance of local values and cultural traditions in devising mentoring programs are also rare

Despite the indicated need for positive youth development programs, the lack of India-based research and unique cultural differences associated with the region reinforce the importance of a community-informed approach. Recommendations from the PYD field echo the need for understanding the impact of local circumstan

materially poor families of multiple castes and religious backgrounds. Following this data

collection, with the help of community members in India and an Advisory Council (comprising

15 affiliated volunteers in the United States and 5 in India), we

group and interview protocols were co-constructed by the authors of this article and directors of the India youth development program. Questions were organized around best practices within the field of mentoring (DuBois et al., 2002), and aimed to elucidate an understanding of the current nature of the program, including its strengths and challenges. Inquiry was also geared toward eliciting information relevant to consideration of the development of a more structured mentoring curriculum. Focus group participants also identified topics most important to the curriculum, which included spirituality, leadership development, goal-setting, and academic achievement. Barriers to adopting the program, as well as the perspectives of participants on the need for mentoring and the resources already within the community, were also explored. Program founders selected a translator from the local community due to his command of Tamil (the regional language) and English, as well as his impartiality and investment in use of research toward the betterment of the program. All focus groups and interviews were audiotaped.

Data was obtained by two of the authors during two visits to India spaced one year apart. During the year following the first visit, audiotapes of the qualitative data were transcribed by a trained research assistant. Difficulties in understanding the dialect or content was discussed by the research team and program directors until resolved; notes taken during the focus groups and interviews were used to supplement the text as necessary. Key themes were identified within the data through the collective effort of the authors. The program directors and members of the Advisory Council reviewed these themes to ensure that the content was consistent with India s cultural norms and context. These themes were also grounded in the observations gathered by two of the authors during the three weeks spent with the Indian community during the first visit. Thus, formal data was contextualized at times by more unstructured information obtained through informal conversations shared with youth and mentor participants.

Phase II: Curriculum Development, Implementation, & Evaluation

Pilot curricula were created for the mentoring program based on the key values of the program (i.e., leadership, community service, spiritual development and academic achievement), synthesis of insights derived from the collected qualitative data referred to above and best practices within the field (e.g., DuBois et al., 2002; Liabo et al., 2005). Curricula ideas were discussed with two additional members of the Advisory Council, as well as presented to the entire Council prior to piloting. Literature in each content area was consulted, with particular attention to international studies and cross-national work. The curriculum modules were translated into Tamil by a professional, India-based translation service to allow for greater accessibility by program participants.

The curriculum was then piloted through the youth development program with five groups in India (i.e., through one 3-hour session each with a group of 11-13 year old children, a group of 14-18 year old adolescents, volunteer mentors, program directors, and high school graduates). An educator within the community not formally associated with the program assisted as a translator, an invaluable asset toward helping explain larger curricula concepts and goals to the community. Process data was also colion s84(n invaETBT4 own1e)4(ll)pvaluaarticipam ., the yosment-4(o)]

parents home to report news, given that many parents did not have a telephone or electricity.

Mentors often attended events at the residential facility if the parent was unable to attend due to

work commitments or lack of transportation; "So, the mentor is there, he is the bridge to take the

issues and the problems to the priest and to get the solution for the problem", said one parent. In

fact, mentors, typically more connected to community leaders and resources within this rural

environment than parents, are often the people who inform parents of the program and

recommend youth involvement.

We expected that parents might be skeptical of mentors, due to potential ambivalence

regarding the absence of their child in their own home and the mentors capacity to provide

perhaps not shared by parents. Instead, most parents discussed the mentoring relationships as

„relieving of burden ; one parent stated, "So, just for her studies we are doing this [the program]

so we are really happy and I am relieved from my burden that she is very happy." Mentors,

associated with a program that (in the words of parents) „rescue youth from a life void of

education and economic sustainability, also served as a „relief from the parents burden. Part of

this relief was due to mentors capacity to encourage youth through helping them excel in their

studies. For example, a mentor reflected, "…my boy is very good at studies and he can work any

kind of problems, he can manage any kind of problems, he can choose his future and he can be".

This program provides an invaluable opportunity for the students to obtain an education while

also reinforcing to parents the significance of an education on their child s future.

The foci within mentoring programs on supporting academics and providing exposure for

youth to other opportunities is shared by trends in other countries. Mentoring programs in

Australia, for example, are predominantly located in schools, and serve a crucial role in

supporting youth academic achievement (Evans et al., 2005). Within this program, one mentor

stated, "We are here to give them exposure to things they might not otherwise see." Although limitations of infrastructure and resources within rural India limit exposure of youth to life outside the village, the presence of a non-familial adult with a different personal and professional background and exposure to the lessons, guidance, and example of those able and willing to mentor in this community offers unique exposure not readily available to these young people.

Furthermore, attention to providing exposure to youth through mentoring is consistent with cultural values in India of approaching youth development holistically, rather than focusing only on one outcome (e.g., academic achievement). These foci occur within the complex landscape of India as it relates to emphasis on educational achievement. While middle and upper-income families may emphasize educational achievement beyond other outcomes, lower-income families face pressures such as need for child work as a source of income, availability of mid-day meals, and teacher instability as contributors to how academics are emphasized (Dreze & Kingdon, 1999). In this study, information gathered from family members suggests that approximately one-half of those youth involved in the program would be working, rather than involved in education, had the program not provided income support for families that allowed the children to attend school. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the mentors with whom we spoke talked about education as a means of „helping others', rather than only as a tool for advancing oneself. Central to this concept, mentors viewed their role as helping the youth develop as a whole person, not focusing solely on their academic achievement. This approach is consistent with the more collectivist perspective, and takes into account the desire of mentors to teach the young people to use their educational achievements to contribute to the lives of others.

Lessons Learned through pilot of curriculum

The feedback received through piloting the curriculum helped to further explain the

influence of contextual factors on program implementation. Part of the curriculum included

In response to this challenge, participants were ensured that they could respond anonymously to the proposed curriculum activities through a brief quantitative measure (translated into Tamil) that followed each activity. Researchers physically left the room during their completion of the quantitative measure to reinforce the anonymity of their responses. We also reiterated multiple times that they were regarded as „experts‟, and that their perspective as citizens and participants within the program was critical to our work. Finally, although these processes helped obtain more critical responses to the curriculum, we also learned, not surprisingly, that there is no substitute for shared time and relationship building in increasing trust with participants. As our visits extended and repeated over time, we found that participants grew increasingly more comfortable offering constructive information regarding better ways to meet the needs and strengths of the community through the mentoring curriculum.

The limited infrastructure and transportation characteristic of rural areas within developing countries also has an impact on program implementation. Specifically, feedback suggests that the program should meet less frequently than may be assumed, and that meetings should extend longer in duration in order to minimize travel needs. While the mentors may have access to transportation, traveling ten miles may require transfer to two busses, and walking over two miles, travel that can require two hours each way in this area. Further, much like mentors in the United States, work and family commitments challenge travel to the facility as often as desired.

Limitations

Data collection in a rural village in southern India requires multiple adjustments unfamiliar to researchers accustomed to working in under-resourced community sites within the United States. Although participants were encouraged to choose the space themselves for the

interview, for example, the residential center in which this program is housed sleeps seven to eight students in one room; therefore, space is at a premium. Finding a quiet and private location for an individual or even small group gathering required significant preparation and at times was not possible. Further, the parent focus group, for example, was attended by more parents than expected and participants were required to sit in rows (similar to a classroom setting) rather than in a circle. This certainly limited the aspired, more collaborative feedback characteristic of a focus group.

Second, the preliminary research was conducted during this team s first trip to India. Thus, some of the more subtle cultural norms (e.g., the tendency for female professionals to contribute less in a focus group predominantly attended by males) were difficult to anticipate and needed to be responded to in „real time . Finally, due to the lack of professional translators in rural areas, it was imperative that we rely on community members for this assistance. While this allowed for an additional community perspective and buy-in, it certainly runs the risk of biasing the data and muddying the process expected by expert translators.

Implications & recommendations for other cross-cultural projects

Findings derived from this project can be more clearly illuminated through the systemic model of mentoring proposed by Keller (2005). This approach primarily focuses on a dyadic relationship between mentor and child, and the third party influences of parent and agency; however, for this article s purpose, the view from the systems perspective suggests the presence

Mentoring relationships may present as singular or multiple dyadic relationships, dyadic

relationships mediated by a third party and triadic relationships creating multiple subsystems of influence (Keller, 2005).

Keller s (2005) conceptual framework helps to identify ways by which multiple parties associated with the mentoring relationship (e.g., relationships between peers who share a mentor) can contribute to youth development. It also provides a visual aide for considering how mentoring relationships in collectivist cultures, such as that of rural India, may extend beyond the young person to other members of the community. The systems perspective implies not just mutual dependence among members but also interdependence such that the quality of each relationship affects the other (Keller, 2005). This approach reinforces the importance of the larger program and cultural context as we consider future development; particularly within this vulnerable community (Sanchez and Colon, 2005).

One key cultural norm to consider when developing a mentoring program is the relative importance of collectivist or individualistic values (Sanchez & Colon, 2005). Many non-Western cultures value a collectivist identity in which multiple individuals play an important role in the lives of children. In these cultures, group mentoring, rather than a one-on-one approach, should be considered to emphasize a collective team approach (Evans et al., 2005).
Central to mentoring programs is a relationship between a youth and non-parental adult; however, cultural norms regarding family values may not facilitate such a relationship. Youth may be less receptive to viewing non-relatives as a significant influence if strong family ties are valued (Sanchez

In terms of community engagement, the lessons learned from this preliminary exploration also suggest potential relevance of the participatory-action approach (Gilmore, Krantz, & Ramirez, 1986), which encourages engagement of community members in the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and "client". As a collaborative process, community-based action research has a greater likelihood for sustainable change; members are seen as experts, their experiences and knowledge are validated, and individuals are empowered (Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2006; Sarri & Sarri, 1992). "Action research...aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people…and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process" (Gilmore et al., 1986, 161). Sarri and Sarri (1992, 278) highlight, "An important outcome of sustained community development is to lay a foundation for democratic participation of all persons". In addition, community action research has been thought to increase community members critical awareness (Freire, 1973; Sarri & Sarri, 1992). Within the initiative described here, this process has started organically, as the mentors with whom we worked have volunteered to co-create parts of the mentoring curriculum, and have, at their own impetus, created an executive board through which to do so. At present, they are poised to co-develop additional curriculum and have had monthly meetings since our departure in order to build program infrastructure that can support the mentoring component. The community member who served as translator during our pilot of the curricula has been nominated to spearhead this effort in tandem with program directors and is receiving a small stipend through the organization to do so.

Through this shared process, mentors have become empowered to consider their program and efforts as mentors systematically, and to work as a group to enhance the infrastructure of

their youth development program. They have also come together as a group and have identified more closely as community members through their shared efforts. As research-oriented collaborators, we have also been privileged to engage in a process of meaning making through the co-construction of data collection methods, synthesis of findings, and curriculum develop, through which collaboration increased over time. This resulted in an intervention more tailored to the local culture and community context.

Based on these experiences, it has become increasingly clear that active collaboration with community members is critical in allowing developers to more fully understand the cultural context within which the program will occur. Contextual values

principles explored here merit consideration by multiple contexts. Systems theory and other applicable theories may suggest, for example, that even the core structure of an intervention (such as mentoring), which in the Western context involves a dyadic structure consisting of one non-parental adult and one youth, must be critically considered prior to applying that structure to a separate cultural context. Instead, the process discussed here supports the value of "small group" mentoring in circumstances in which the needs of youth may be disproportionate to the number of available non-parental adult volunteers. This approach is further supported by the collectivist norms of a place such as India, in which youth are more accustomed to sharing, and less inclined toward more individualized, competitive approaches to collaboration. Further, as is increasingly supported by research (Evans et al., 2005), those most positioned to advise researchers on such fundamental questions are those members of the society in which the programming takes place. Thus, the participatory action approach to research, while expensive and time-consuming, is well suited for cross-national work such as that depicted here. Without consistent and supported local input, aspects of program development, implementation, and measurement may lack

References

Batra, S. and K. Bhaumik (2004) „Intergenerational Relationships: A Study of Three Generations , Indian Journal of Gerontol

Krumer-Nevo, M. and A. Barak (2006) „Services Users Perspectives on the Benefits System in