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Mentorship and Black Youths' Perspectives with Lakindra Mitchell Dove

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Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship, innovations, and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge, practice, and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

I am Lakindra Mitchell Dove, assistant professor in the School of Social Work.

My research focuses on racial and ethnic identity development, specifically among black children and adolescents, adolescent development, and youth mentoring.

Based on my knowledge and experiences, youth mentoring programs, hypothetically, are designed to support youth with a specific area of development, which could include academic support, peer support, social and emotional support, in addition to other areas. Most youth mentoring programs are on a voluntary basis, while some organizations pay mentors to work with mentees and their families, and in this case this would be considered a professional mentor. And there are also informal mentors where individuals develop natural relationships with youth and agree to support youth in a particular area of development. This usually occurs in communities and neighborhoods where natural ongoing interactions happen. Mentorship can also occur within the family systems. Most people don't consider a family system as a way for mentorship to happen. But for example, you can have an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or other extended family member assume the role of providing specific guidance to a youth within the family.

Hypothetically speaking, most youth mentoring programs are structured based on developmental needs and typically work with youth either at the elementary, middle, or high school levels, or across all levels. The practices that mentors use can vary and often align with what's developmentally appropriate. What we typically see is a lot of engagement and activities based on youth's interests, such as the arts, sports, science, technology, and other areas. Mentors use these outlets as ways to support youth with identified goals or areas of improvement. And as youth develop, these practices shift to having discussions about life experiences, supporting youth with navigating peer relationships, exploring what they want to pursue in life, and assisting them with the transition to young adulthood.

I think it's imperative to understand how mentorship programs may differ from marginalized youth because many of the foundational practices and principles of youth mentoring were not intentionally developed with the purpose of serving marginalized youth. Thus there are aspects of youth mentoring that may not align with their experiences, and as the result there can be unintentional consequences for marginalized youth. For example, youth mentoring programs have historically focused on the youth as the individual, and what we have learned from working with marginalized populations is that there's often a communal aspect that is important. So incorporating family members, caregivers, communities, or other individuals is important to the success of the mentor-mentee relationship. This also requires a shift from, you know, the one-on-one, mentoring to working with youth more holistically, understanding family, peer group, community, and how they function in society. It is also important to understand the unique experiences of marginalized youth who are socialized differently in a society that often does not honor or value their identities or experiences.

Culturally responsive mentorship and practice, from my opinion, involves an understanding that cultural differences exist among youth and families. It includes being open to learning about values, beliefs, traditions, and cultural practices of the youth and families that a mentor and or organization is working with. It also includes, um, you know, demonstrating humility and vulnerability, being curious and open to exploring differences, and learning from the youth. Not necessarily from a space that the youth is being placed in a position to teach them, mentor what they need to know culturally, but from a space of understanding that a youth has knowledge that they can share and be valuable to the relationship as well. I also think that culturally responsive mentorship is engaging in reciprocal relationships with youth and families. One that is not based on hierarchy or expertise, but one that also doesn't rely on a dominant worldview that is often counter to the views and perspectives of those from various cultural backgrounds. It is important to note that some studies have found that the lack of understanding of cultural nuances has contributed to failed mentor-mentee relationships. So, we do have evidence to suggest that culturally responsive mentorship is a critical component to consider.

I think it's important for me to highlight that I am a practice-informed researcher. So prior to entering academia, I worked in the field of social work as a practitioner for about 15 years, with primarily working with children, youth and families, and agencies or organizations that served this population. And so, much of my research is informed by my practice experiences and the areas in which I encounter challenges in the field, many nights of feeling frustrated about my observations, observing gaps in services, or also exploring opportunities for growth for myself as a practitioner. So, this is what led me to explore the experiences of black youth related to race and ethnic identity development. The other area that I think is important for me to note is that I'm actually a native Oregonian born and raised, so I have a wonderful opportunity to work in the community in which I grew up. In a way this is a way for me to kind of pay it forward, or to give back to the community. And there are a lot of changes that have occurred since I was a young person and, I'm just very interested to see how we can continue to support youth, specifically black youth, and healthy ethnic and identity development.

Through this study I was seeking to understand whether race and ethnicity influences the mentor-mentee relationship. The primary aims of the study were to explore the experiences of mentors and mentees regarding race and ethnic identity development to explore whether a racial and ethnic identity is actually discussed or addressed within these relationships, and to potentially identify any supports or challenges that may contribute to addressing race and ethnic identity development within the mentor-mentee relationship. My interest in this area of youth mentoring was sparked by the differences in findings within youth mentoring literature. That question whether matching youth of color with mentors based on their race or ethnicity or cultural similarities mattered. So, in addition, there's also limited research that explores this area from the perspective of youth. So, I wanted to develop a study that intentionally highlighted the perspectives and lived experiences of youth engaging in a mentorship program. It was important to examine the importance of culture and family engagement and youth mentorship from the perspective of both the mentors and the mentees, because there are often differences in how these components are perceived from the perspective of the mentees and the mentors, so I wanted to be sure to capture the experiences of the mentees first and foremost. Given that the study really wanted to highlight and amplify the voices of youth participating in the study, in addition to hearing how the mentors

engaged with families and care caregivers and then exploring whether or not, you know, there were similarities or differences or how to help support mentors and mentees in developing the relationships as it relates to including, family and caregivers in the process.

The findings from the study revealed that black youth perceive the importance of race and ethnicity, particularly that of their mentor in a variety of ways. So, I look at it on a spectrum. Within the literature there is this question of whether the matching of youth of color with mentors based on racial and ethnic similarities or cultural similarities is one that has been posed with differing findings. And so, I think it's important that we move away from this binary of whether or not it is important in understanding how it is important to youth and how they see race and ethnicity. And most importantly, I think that the youth highlighted the importance of a genuine and authentic relationship. They also noted the importance of a mentor being vulnerable and showing vulnerability and showing the willingness to learn and grow as it relates to understanding race and ethnicity and cultural differences. One of the things that I found surprising when conducting this study, given that it occurred during the pandemic, so, I interviewed youth remotely via Zoom and first, and for foremost, the fact that they were willing to actually log on and chat with me was important to know in the context of what was happening during the pandemic. But I think that that was a critical moment for youth to really understand the importance of their relationship with their mentor. A lot of them talked about the gestures that their mentors demonstrated, commitment that they displayed to remaining connected, and whether that was through brief check-ins, really asking questions about how their family were doing, providing food boxes and other basic needs and supports. And so one of the things that I felt was important to really note within the study is that the youth felt like that was a demonstration of this being more than a paid job. The youth really felt like their mentors cared about them.

Based on the research findings, I think there are a few key takeaways to note. Given that this research focuses specifically on experiences of black youth, there are implications for practitioners and also organizations that work specifically with this population. I think the most critical takeaways are the importance of understanding how race and ethnicity can influence the relationship with youth and families, and to be prepared to do

your individual work as a mentor and as an organization as it relates to engagement with youth and families from diverse backgrounds.

Another key takeaway is the importance of establishing a genuine relationship with family and caregivers who serve as a support to the mentor and mentee relationship. And the final key takeaway is to engage from a space of authenticity, to be open and vulnerable with youth, to be willing to share mishaps and missteps, and to really capitalize on opportunities to demonstrate what a healthy and appropriate relationship with youth can look like.

I am Lakindra Mitchell Dove and I conduct research that seeks to understand ways to best support black youth with developing a healthy racial and ethnic identity and sense of self in a society that is still learning how to see their true essence.

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