

Keepin' it Real: How Culturally Congruent Mentors Support SEL for Minoritized Youth

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Introduction:

Culturally congruent mentors are a positive influence for social and emotional learning for minoritized youth. The development of culturally conceptualized mentoring relationships and a clear understanding of racialized discourses in schools is required to turn the tide of disproportionate opportunity (Ladson-Billings, 2006) experienced by minoritized students. This narrative inquiry explores how culturally congruent mentors conceptualize their relationships with minoritized youth as a way to interrupt a path to incarceration and offer social and emotional support. The researchers conducted a narrative inquiry with mentors in an afterschool program called PATHS. PATHS serves Black boys aged 10 to 17 who live in a particularly economically depressed section of the city that often experiences violence, drugs, and crime. The mentors all have close ties to the local community. Each mentor has a college degree and has faced many of the same challenges that the youth of the after-school program continue to face. The mentors' voices are at the center of the research as they enter into alliances with minoritized¹ youth based on culturally congruent values with an understanding of the students' challenges that is non-judgmental of the students' experiential context.

Research Support:

There is extensive evidence supporting positive benefits of social and emotional learning (SEL). Mahoney, Durlak, and Weissberg (2018) confirmed the benefits "on a range of behavioral, attitudinal, emotional, and academic outcomes" in an examination of four meta-analyses. SEL can promote equity through an asset based perspective, acknowledging and recognizing youths' culture and experiences, and building supportive relationships with adults that can mentor them in their personal development (Schlund, Jagers, & Schlinger, 2020).

After-school programs (ASPs) aimed at supporting youth are also an effective intervention showing positive effects on the achievement of academically at-risk youth (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Lauer, et al., 2006). The most recent meta-analysis of ASPs revealed that most effective programs shared four characteristics: (1) the lessons and activities used to obtain skill development were connected and coordinated; (2) learning was active; (3)

¹ The term "minoritized students" as opposed to students of color, at-risk youth, or minority students is informed by Benitez's (2010) use of "minoritized" and is intended to emphasize the "process [action vs. noun] of student minoritization" (p. 131) in recognition that "minority" status is socially constructed in specific societal contexts.

the program had a component dedicated to developing personal and social skills; and (4) the personal and social skills were taught in an explicit manner (Durlak et al., 2010). Integrating social and emotional learning with ASPs is a natural fit. One important factor to mention is the potential harm that can occur when mentors are not a racial or cultural match. Lindwall's (2017) study supported other researchers who have looked at the harm done in mentoring relationships and concluded that such relationships can do more harm than good in cases of a cultural mismatch based on race or ethnicity.

A key component to an ASP is the adult participant or mentor. Research supports the importance of a mentor with the same background or cultural identity, referred to as a culturally congruent mentor. Lindwall (2017, p. 79) found that "healthy racial, cultural, and ethnic identity development is crucial for young people and requires greater access to concrete identity examples for kids from marginalized groups". She explains the reason for same-race matches with youth and mentors was to support youth as they learn to navigate a world where the color of their skin plays a significant role in how people see and interact with them. Mentors from the same community as the mentees, giving the mentors the ability to provide culturally appropriate guidance filled a much needed gap by providing children from a high-risk community with positive role models (Irwin, 2002). Owora, (2018) conducted a study that implemented culturally congruent mentoring in an elementary school. The results demonstrated a reduction in disruptive behavior, suggesting cultural congruence should be a key factor in supporting students. Culturally congruent mentoring was utilized to expand the diversity in the Maternal and Child Health profession (Belcher, 2022). Some of the results indicated the importance of knowledge "of the unique psychosocial stressors faced by many underrepresented scholar or scholars from disadvantaged backgrounds." Stephens (2019) argues "an intentional cultural relevancy lens could improve and transform the way mentors help mentees acculturate..." leading to improvement in academic achievement.

Both ASPs and the mentors involved in these programs are known to have a significant influence on minoritized youth and their social emotional learning. These programs are most effective for minority youth at risk of academic failure, with behavioral difficulties at school (Dubois et al., 2011). The mentor's impact is most lasting in a situation of cultural congruence to promote healthy and concrete identity formation (Lindwall, 2017).

Findings:

This inquiry explores the values and motivations that culturally congruent mentors carry in a successful after-school program that is known to have a positive influence on youth and utilizes a narrative analysis research methodology. Narrative analysis uses first-person accounts of experience, using a particular framework, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), with emphasis on the narrative's relationship to the social context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The most prevalent themes from this study include:

1. **Awareness of students' home and community context and being part of the context.** As a theme, the data indicate mentors' awareness of challenges and difficulties that students face in their homes and communities because they experience similar challenges and difficulties. Values, challenges, and barriers are part of this theme.
2. **Keepin' it real.** This theme is named *Keepin' it real* due to the prevalence of the phrase; all mentors used the phrase several times. *Keepin' it real*, though difficult to define succinctly, honors the mentors' words as a referent to their values and their approach to the youth at PATHS and honesty. The theme explains how mentors DO

mentoring, how they share advice, and the tools that they try to pass on to the youth in PATHS.

Theme 1: Awareness of Students' Home and Community Context and Being Part of the Context

In many ways, the mentors see themselves in the youth that they serve. All mentors express not only an obligation to help, but that being a mentor is an essential part of their identity. The mentors have a detailed awareness of challenges and barriers that students face in their homes and communities. They feel that, fundamentally, the home is the first place where youth experience a lack of structure and social and emotional support. Mentors cite absent parents and poverty as the main contributing factors that leave the youth without a proper role model to instill important values and behaviors. Follow-up discussions revealed that the mentors blame structural inequalities like mass incarceration as the basis of the breakdown of family structure (Personal communication with Mr. Gaff and Miss McCron October 3, 2019). Mentors take ownership in the role of guiding the youth to cope with the dangers of the streets. All mentors see both home and the streets as places of risk where youth may be subjected to drug abuse or gang affiliation by peers or others they come into contact with. Mentors view institutional or systemic racism as a barrier for the boys in the program, specifically citing barriers when entering the workforce with a college degree and finding that securing employment they were prepared for wasn't open to a Black male. Finally, the mentors demonstrate various levels of hope regarding their ability to positively impact youth in the program. Overall, for the mentors, knowing the challenges and barriers youth face is the foundation for reaching youth in order to make an impact in their lives.

All mentors explained ways that they have *been there*. The mentors explain their own connection to the youth: similar life experiences. They all demonstrate a motivation to give back by guiding the boys at PATHS as they grapple with the challenges that come with being minoritized youth. Each mentor has experienced some or part of the same issues that the youth of the program collectively face. Those barriers, both named and experienced by mentors, are single-parent households, absent family members, drug abuse in their families or communities, pressure or affiliation with gangs and drugs, abuse, poverty, poor performance in school and homelessness. They have clarity on the challenges that youth face, and they insist on helping mentees to recognize and deal with these biases.

All of the mentors place a high value on their education as a means of achieving a better life than if they had not earned a degree in higher education. Because of this, mentors discuss the importance of school work and academic achievement with the boys at the program.

Descriptions from Mentors. In each interview, mentors demonstrated intimate knowledge of the students' home lives and spoke about challenges the youth face. According to the mentors, knowing the challenges and barriers youth face was the foundation for reaching youth in order to make an impact in their lives. Mentors described various challenges the youth face: homelessness and being in foster homes, absent parents, poverty, lack of structure in parenting, the lure of the streets, peer pressure, and the presence of drugs. Mentors' statements also reinforce their relationships with students as a culturally relevant practice.

Miss Staros - I think the biggest challenge is the family structure. Like a lot of our boys now, I still have to work with and put in that trust and build that relationship because some of them don't have mothers that they can look to as a mother. Some of them have been abandoned or fallen into the system and well, everybody is losing hope in them... So one of the biggest challenges is their

family. Honestly, in this culture you have the majority of kids going through the same things. They see their family making those same decisions.

Mr. Witt: Kids are sitting in class, thinking, “You are worried about this math test and at home I don’t have any food. I got all these people in the house. My mama got all these bastards in the house and I gotta clean up after them. I gotta clean up all the kids and shower them. I’m sixteen and I can’t even have a life. It’s all kinds of things; like mom’s on drugs, father’s dead, I’m living with my grandma and we can’t even afford a pair of shoes.”

Four of the six mentors shared that students’ parents are too young. They feel that this leads to a lack of structure wherein young parents don’t teach their kids how to cope with the dangers of “the streets.” Mr. Witt goes further, explaining an example:

Mr. Witt: We have some mothers whose kids sell drugs so they can eat, I mean so they can have stuff. We got parents who be on their kids’ social media perpetuating gang stuff. So it’s not just the kids, it’s the kids’ behavior because of the bad parents. They’re young and don’t give the kids structure.

All of the mentors discussed drug abuse as a risk that is easy for the boys to fall into. Mr. Witt, Miss Staros, and Miss McCron all spoke about the home potentially being a place where the youth come into contact with drugs and ‘the street’ as a place where youth are certain to encounter drugs. All mentors talked about “the street” as a place of risk, alluding to violence, drugs, and gangs. Mr. Welsh described “the streets” as a place of risk in his young life and for the boys in the program. He explained that when he was a young man, the lure of fast money from “hustling” [selling] drugs was something that he succumbed to. Mr. Welsh also recognizes peers, on the street, as part of the pressure to use or sell drugs. All mentors made statements that convey PATHS is an important place to learn how to avoid falling into gang affiliation, drugs, and behaviors that would bring the boys into contact with law enforcement.

Miss McCron: We’re realistic in realizing that our boys are going to be subjected to things. There’s a lot of peer pressure. There’s a lot of things that happen on the street that I couldn’t handle – that these boys are handling. So when they’re subjected to drugs or they’re subjected to their friends that are in gangs or all these things, so that they can make the best decision possible at that given moment. If they DO choose to use drugs, they know the effects because we’ve done that during Education. They’ve taken that risk they’re taking that chance of this happening to their bodies. We’re coming at them with the perspective like, “Hey, we’re not saying that you’re never gonna do this, but if you ARE gonna do it, these are the possible consequences to your body and to you legally.” In this way, we are trying to build them up . . . help them be one step ahead of other people.

All of the mentors described a deep understanding of the barriers and challenges youth face coupled with the idea that their role is to be the structure or the role model and the social and emotional support that the youth should have at home. The lessons developed by Miss McCron and Miss Staros, referred to above as Education, are designed to prevent youth from engaging in risky behaviors. Miss Bell explained her position in reference to being a role model. She worried whether her efforts are enough. “I hope [the program] it’s enough to carry them through. A lot of them look up to us more than they do their own parents. After they leave us, they still have to go home.”

All mentors acknowledged that many of the youth they work with experience trauma at home. The fact that the mentors have overcome similar challenges influences their position that risk factors are hurdles to be overcome rather than barriers. Lack of

family structure and good parenting, as well as the presence of drugs in their homes and communities, are significant challenges that are known factors putting youth at risk of not graduating high school or being pushed out of school. An important thread within this theme is the mentors' critique of society and their understanding of institutional or systemic racism as a barrier for the boys in the program. Their perspective involves understanding challenges students face outside of their home, on a wider societal level, and is often connected with issues of racism. Understanding these challenges and having a wider critique of racism informs how the mentors attempt to help youth steer clear of a path to incarceration. This disposition is culturally relevant in that mentors prioritize understanding barriers in order to support and teach the youth.

Mr. Welsh: I give kids the tools to be successful, the coping skills. You know it's different for every race, but for Black males, it's really different. It's systematically designed for you not to make it. Even though I went to college and everything, when I got out, I ended up going to prison. The job market wasn't open for me. I turned to the streets and started hustlin' for that fast money. For a lot of people, their recidivism has been so high because they don't have the skills before going in. I never liked school but I never quit going because in order to be in the battle – this is a battle – in this system. But in order to be in it, you've got to know what you're up against. Either you will end up getting killed, going to prison, you'll end up mentally incompetent. You'll end up somehow systematically sidelined. And it's easy, so many people behind bars.

Miss Staros: I think it's good that the staff are the same race and we have experienced things in this way. I think it's pretty bad because society has made it like it's all of us against each other. I think it's hard because the kids can see that too and they're not as open to somebody white or another color.

Mr Gaff: [Talking about when African Americans graduate from college.] They can't find a position in their field. But it isn't about what you can't find. It's that, "We're not hiring right now." That's that systematic shit. That's a big thing that we teach the kids at the program here, because our kids come to us with a lot of anger. The fact that they are dealing with racism but they don't know how to deal with their emotions. Here in [city name], they lock you up for 6 months, let you out, lock you up, let you out. Then when they finally get you of age they say [smacks table top] "Let's give him six years off the top!"

Miss McCron: I get why they might come into the classroom and have an attitude, but someone else [a classroom teacher] might not get that. So helping them to see that not everyone is coming into their day the way they're coming at it is an important lesson. And helping them identify how they can be successful in working with a middle-class white woman as a teacher when they're dealing with all these struggles and she wants them to sit down and open a book and behave and they're worried about all this other stuff that they're going through.

Miss Staros has a deep faith that every single child can be positively influenced by a mentor. She described an example of one of the boys at PATHS. Ultimately, even incarceration doesn't mean that her influence was not a success. For Miss Staros, it's important that she had a positive impact, no matter how long it took the child to be influenced.

Miss Staros: I never think nobody is too far off where they can't be redeemed. So, I have a kid now where I have to go to a hearing for him tomorrow for school. And we have been working with him and it seems like nothing is happening. . . . So um, I have to go to that and I could have said no, but me, I always think that even if you can't see what right now going on in front of you. Just that little seed

will start to burst. I think that it looks bad, but I'm sure that somewhere down the line, if we [mentors] are putting in the work and trying to make a difference, speaking those words over them, they are going to HEAR it. They might have had to go to jail to hear it. But I'm pretty sure in their heart, they're going to be like, "Man, somebody tried to tell me this, somebody tried to do that." So I don't just write them off.

Theme 2: Keepin' it Real

The phrase *keepin' it real* appeared in data analysis as the second most prevalent code. It is a phrase that the mentors all use with the assumption that the meaning was widely understood. Keepin' it real is a difficult phrase to define because it has widespread usage in the interviews. Mentors use the phrase in three major ways; being genuine, being truthful with themselves and the kids, and warm demand (Ware, 2006). The purpose of *keepin' it real*, for the mentors, is to form a relationship based on truth, respect and social and emotional support. Once such a relationship is in place, the youth are willing to take direction and advice – mentors can give them the tools to overcome barriers.

Mentors practice *keepin' it real* with the boys at PATHS by taking the time to gain trust and build a relationship with the students to be able to provide social and emotional support. The relationship and trust is built on a shared understanding of the challenges marginalized youth face. The mentors describe being genuine by taking ownership of their past experiences and being truthful and open about those experiences with the boys as a way to form a relationship based on trust and honesty. Once such a relationship is in place, the youth are willing to take direction and advice—mentors can give them the tools to overcome barriers. The advice given can be considered the tools youth use as and may be conceptualized as part of the mentors' praxis.

Keepin' it real serves to define mentors' approach to communicating issues of racial bias in order to prepare the youth for situations that they will encounter. The mentors believe that when students understand racial bias they can be prepared and protected.

Finally, *keepin' it real* involves a warm demander approach (Sandilos, Rimm-Kauffman, & Cohen 2017; Ware, 2006). The mentors' warm demand approach often takes the form of an assertive stance of moral authority, both because they've been there and because of their position as adults who have overcome barriers. They use warm demand in establishing boundaries and in shaping behaviors. The mentor's unwillingness to accept excuses or bad behavior from students sets expectations and boundaries that enable the mentors to advise and guide the boys to make informed choices.

Descriptions from mentors. Miss Staros explained that getting youth to open up is a process because they have been written off by people before. She explained that the students' perspective is, "They've got to feel you out before they open up to you." She further explained, "I put that off on institutional racism. It makes it so the kids are not as open to other people." This statement underscores the trepidation marginalized students feel with the *other* while signaling the importance of a culturally congruent mentor. Miss Staros feels that the students have been marginalized by other races and sees this as a reason for being genuine and taking the time to form trust. If they don't trust you, it is difficult for them to accept the social and emotional support. Miss Bell shared that the boys at the program "can spot you easily. They know you're real when you're telling the truth about the things you've been through." This statement shows that being genuine and honest and having experienced the same barriers is an important part of gaining the trust of the youth for the purpose of opening a line of communication. The mentors can immediately attend to the social and emotional needs of the youth when they need it most.

Miss Bell makes an important comparison between the after school program's mentor relationship with youth and the teacher relationship with youth:

I believe that we are authentic. We can be ourselves with kids, we are 100% honest. In schools, the teacher is there to teach. They don't have time to have that one on one. Here, if a kid is having a hard time we can pull him in the office and have those difficult conversations. We can talk to them, you know like a mentor, like a parent, and have that one-to-one relationship with them. Whereas a teacher has 28 kids she has to focus on.

Mentors use *keepin' it real* to describe taking ownership of their past experiences and being truthful about those experiences with the boys at PATHS. Mr. Welsh recalled a time when he was driving some of the boys home from the program:

When we go ride places, I tell them about stuff that I used to do and they look at me like (makes a surprised face). You know I've been there and they identify with the fact that I'm not bullshitting them. "I've been in the world you thinking about. I've been there, dude. I've been hiding under the porch with the police 'round looking for me." I've been in some situations, you know what I'm saying? So when they come to me they just know that I don't play games with them.

This statement by Mr. Welsh describes how he communicates openly with the boys to gain credibility and trust by taking ownership of his past.

Keepin' it real is about sharing the truth of students' positionality as black male youth within the context of challenges, home and community contexts. Mentors keep it real by openly sharing their perspectives of how racial bias and "the system" are challenges to be faced. Miss Staros explained that being truthful to her mentees about how society defines marginalized youth is a part of *keepin' it real*.

Race is definitely another thing we talk to the kids about. You can't act like it doesn't exist. "Let's be real with how they're looking at you. You're just a number and pretty soon you'll be off to prison. If you are failing school, you automatically know where you're gonna be."

Miss Staros made it clear that the boys at the program are labeled both institutionally and by their families. Part of her work is to be truthful about how they are unfairly labeled and to overcome the labels. She stated, "Words have been spoken over them that are not necessarily true. So it's important to have somebody to talk with you [the boys], to speak those positive words over you and not just throw you out." Miss Staros' linguistic phrasing about words spoken over a person is consistent with African American religious beliefs about the power of words in naming or labeling a person (Alkebulan, 2013). This is another example of being culturally relevant because she is framing truth around her sociopolitical consciousness and helping to push back on deficit labels of the students in the context of spiritualism found within the Black community.

Continuing with the idea that *keepin' it real* involves being truthful with mentees by being transparent about issues of racial bias, Mr. Gaff discusses the importance of education but has a critique of society that just having an education wasn't enough of a tool for the boys. Mr. Gaff explains:

We are real with kids. We ain't about to sit here and sugarcoat shit. Because why would I sugarcoat something? And then, "Oh Mr. Gaff told me . . ." No Mr. Gaff didn't tell you THAT. I wouldn't put you in a bad situation, no.

Mr. Gaff's statement reflects his propensity to counsel the mentees with the intent to keep them out of bad situations. He went on to discuss the need for a diploma and higher education, but tempers the importance of a degree with teaching the boys about injustices they may face. Mr. Gaff's statement is *keepin' it real* by openly discussing racial, socio-political, social-emotional, and systemic barriers that he believes boys in the program are likely to face. Transparency and truth are part of the mentors' approach to *keepin' it real*.

At the same time they've got to understand what's in front of them really. If we're giving kids the tools, but we don't tell them how to use them. Like, "Here, here's this (indicates diploma on the wall), but I forgot to tell you that the police might pull you over for nothing or that your boss might say some racist shit at the job. Oh, I forgot to tell you that one of your classmates who might be a different skin color than you might call you a nigger." I just want them to understand that it ain't always the right. You can stand up for yourself, you can use the right tone and be forceful in what you're saying, but you've got to understand your surroundings and understand where we are at in this time and age.

The final expression of *keepin' it real* is the role of the warm demander. The literature on culturally responsive teaching supports teachers adopting an assertive stance with urban students. The warm demander has been referenced in literature as a characteristic of a culturally responsive teacher who is caring, does not lower expectations, and is an effective disciplinarian (Sandilos, Rimm-Kauffman, & Cohen 2017; Ware, 2006). Teachers can act as a caring ally as well as hold students accountable with high standards, not allowing minoritized youth to accept learned helplessness (Hammond, 2015). She goes on to explain that a key feature of the warm demander is building rapport and trust, earning the right to demand effort, and viewed by students as someone who cares. All of these characteristics were clearly evident in the culturally competent mentors at PATHS.

Furthermore, Miss Bell and the other mentors don't accept excuses from the boys in the program. She tells the boys, "You can't have no excuse like your mom can't bring you today! We're picking you up and we're dropping you off so you're gonna go to program." When Mr. Welsh participated in the lesson about time management and realized that parents don't enforce a bedtime, he took it upon himself to ask the boys what time they got to sleep each day as they enter PATHS.

Mr. Welsh is very clear about being tough with the boys he mentors. He explains, "I love kids, but I am not their friend. I don't care if they don't like me. All I care about is if I give you the tools you need to be successful." Mr. Welsh framed a couple of notes written to him by the boys he mentors at PATHS. One of the notes reads, "Thanks for keepin' it real with us and you know, tellin' us like it is." He explains what the note means to him, "They respect the fact that when they come to me, they get what they ask for. And they know that I'm gonna help them do whatever I can."

Mr. Welsh shared a bit about a very meaningful relationship he has with one of the boys in the program whom I will call Marquis (pseudonym). He explained, "If I never work this job again, I would be so happy for the work that I've done with Marquise and the way that he has come around." Mr. Welsh begins with the first day that they met:

He was right out there (common area). I told him to do something and he told me what he WASN'T going to do. So I said, "Okay we need to talk in the office." So after that he didn't want to get up. I pulled him on into the office, we get right here, (motions to the floor vent next to his desk) I'm standing right here. This dude looked up at me and swung at me. Yes, he told me what he wasn't going to do then he looked up and swung at me! This has been two years ago, so he had to be about ten. But by then he had been

through the court system. Through a whole lot of systems . . . and so after he did that, I told him, “Dude, you’re lucky I don’t step on you.” Now people will take that and say “Oh that’s harsh” but it’s not harsh when you got a kid that goes to school and jumps on the teacher. You got a kid that goes to school and talks back to the principal and tells the principal what HE’s going to do. You got a kid that goes home and tells his mom what he IS and what he AIN’T going to do. And since then, I’ve been to court with him, spoke on his behalf in front of the judge. I’ve been to his house, spoke to his mom. She used to come in here and cry. Tell me how she was going to send him back to the foster program because she can’t deal with him anymore and all the stuff that he’s done to her and her family over the years. Then I had her come in here, maybe a year or so ago, she sat here and she was so happy. She smiled and talked so much about how Marquise is changing. What the after-school program has done for her. And now she had another son that was coming up, following in Marquise’s OLD footsteps and wanted to know what we could do for him. That’s why we have her other son out here.

Mr. Welsh’s story describes a warm demander approach. Important in this narrative, is that Marquise was being pushed out of his home and into foster care because of his behaviors. Marquise had been violent at school, had been expelled, and had been sentenced to spend some time in the juvenile detention center. In fact, he arrived at the after-school program, on the day this story took place, in handcuffs. Mr. Welsh explained that he believes that Marquise was already on the path to incarceration. Mr. Welsh cited this day as the beginning of a turning point for Marquise. Mr. Welsh’s mentor role involved many types of interactions, apart from being a warm demander. As described earlier when defining these themes, the purpose of *keepin’ it real* is to form a relationship based on truth and respect. Once such a relationship is in place, the youth are willing to take direction and advice – mentors can give them the tools to overcome barriers. Mr. Welsh explained that he established respect with Marquise beginning with the day-one interaction. He developed close communication with Marquise’s mother to understand Marquise’s context and challenges. Mr. Welsh took several steps to guide Marquise to make positive choices in interacting with school personnel and with his family.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the impact of mentoring relationships as a culturally relevant intervention for minoritized youth and a device for building equity through social and emotional learning. This research has direct implications for advancing more equitable practices in supporting minoritized youth. Mentoring relationships may have the potential to create opportunities for and to improve the lived experiences of marginalized students by offering a positive, culturally relevant approach to supporting minoritized youth and pushing back against the societal and institutional forces that could set these marginalized students on a path toward incarceration.

It is imperative that educators and policymakers learn how persistently disciplined and marginalized students’ life trajectories can be impacted. This research, about a culturally congruent mentoring relationship as a culturally responsive intervention and social and emotional support for minoritized students, supports a larger dialogue about the inequities minoritized students experience and the value of community-based programs and social and emotional learning. Roffman, Pagano, & Hirsch (2001) found that after-school programs provide a positive alternative for minoritized youth who face dangers and challenges of their neighborhoods during unsupervised after-school hours. Their research demonstrated a significantly higher level of functioning for older boys when strong relationships with staff members were in place.

School efforts should focus on ensuring that minoritized youth have access to meaningful relationships with culturally relevant pedagogues, including those who serve youth in community-based and after-school programs. Proponents of approaches to schooling that place culture at the center (culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining) in conjunction with social and emotional learning, recognize that frameworks based on the mainstream normative schooling expectations hold inherent biases that limit minoritized students. Students from backgrounds that don't align to those of a white public space will be denied cultural support and valuation (Ladson-Billings 2009; Brown & Brown, 2012). This is problematic for minoritized students because the expected behaviors are based on the norms of the dominant group, thereby making these social skills the skill-set of a white public space. "Although few of us are conscious of how the sub-texts of our native language shape our own behavior, we intuitively tend to interpret the behavior of others within the parameters of the familiar subtext." (Vincent et al., 2011). In other words, educators and students of differing backgrounds have a constant tension based on how actions and communicative interactions are both enacted and interpreted. Training staff on the varied dimensions on which cultures tend to diverge is an essential component of culturally responsive practice in schools for academic and behavioral support (Vincent et al., 2011). This research, about the impact of a culturally congruent mentoring relationship as a culturally responsive intervention for minoritized students, offers an alternative to a common approach to school-wide interventions. School programming should be carefully implemented with extensive and ongoing culturally responsive training for educators to be conducted before, and in conjunction with, the implementation of programming.

The current approach to supporting minoritized youth in schools that lack comprehensive staff development in implicit bias and culturally responsive pedagogy is grounded in practice that conceptualizes minoritized youth in a deficit perspective. School-based interventions often seek to instill acceptable behaviors based on white middle-class norms that function to create and maintain inequitable opportunities for minoritized students. Minoritized youth may be affected by a host of other societal ills including systemic racism and a long history socio-historical oppression in many forms. Brown and Brown (2012) explained how society's normative ways of being are aligned to the culture, expectations, and behaviors of the white and middle class, the dominant group. Conversely, this means that "people who think, approach, value, act, or experience things different from the norm get positioned as abnormal, deviant, or strange" (Brown & Brown, 2012, p. 17). The cultural difference theory has given rise to ideas such as culturally responsive teaching, culturally competent teaching, and culturally relevant teaching. While each of these theories differs in approach, the critical constant is the acknowledgment that U.S. schools operate in normative ways that marginalize alternative perspectives in favor of white, middle-class norms. These theories also recognize how school approaches that are "limited to white middle-class norms function to create and maintain inequitable opportunities for minoritized students" (Brown & Brown, 2012, p. 19).

This research has the potential to offer schools and communities an alternate approach to supporting minoritized students. The potential benefits for minoritized students are: access to someone who has a concern for the student's well-being, an understanding of the sociocultural background of the student, and experience in navigating white public spaces. The potential benefits of a positive culturally congruent mentor might be enhanced intrinsic motivation to work through conflict, enhanced socio-emotional skills, enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy. The potential benefits for educational stakeholders: a positive means of cultivating socio-emotional skills and increased protective factors against a path to incarceration. Enhancing these areas often correlates to improved attendance and academic motivation. Consideration should include an expanded idea of programming that supports not only academic achievement, but social, emotional, and political dimensions of achievement. Toward that end, we must include an

expanded consideration to include culturally congruent mentors whose values, insights, and lived experiences position them as culturally sustaining contributors.

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