

RESEARCH SUMMARY

“Pharmakons: The Poison and Cure of Black Youth Mentorship in Canada”

What is this study about?

This study examined both the positive and challenging aspects and experiences within Black youth mentorship programming (BYMP) in Canada. The study explored how BYMP can be beneficial for uplifting Black youth, but also harmful when practices are not grounded in an Afrocentric approach. The study concluded with recommendations to encourage more culturally-rooted and affirming BYMP.

Who was involved in the study?

The Black-led research team first conducted a scan of Canadian Black Youth Mentorship Programs and compiled all publicly available information on each of these programs. Programs were then contacted, and the program leads were invited to complete surveys and participate in conversation circles.

How was the study conducted?

The research team reviewed all 46 known BYMP in Canada. The administered surveys aimed to collect information about the program, and 47 responses were received. Following the surveys, conversation circles with 10 directors were held online to more openly investigate the “challenges, opportunities, and best practices within the Black youth mentorship ecosystem in Canada”. Liming was used during the conversation circles, a culturally-sensitive method that allows participants to focus and drive the conversation rather than having a researcher moderate them. Information from program websites, survey results, and conversation circles was then analyzed to identify key concerns and objectives of such programs.

What were the key findings?

Participants in the conversation circles identified several concerns regarding the current scene of BYM in Canada. Several participants spoke about how many program or organization leaders were not Black, and often White. Black program staff were often hired only for part-time or ground-level jobs, limiting their influence and job security.

The study showed how BYMP supports “cultural preservation and affirmation, nurturing Black self-esteem and identity.” However, the study also shed light on how mentorship for Black youth can be driven by economic outcomes, particularly focusing on their labour market integration. As such, the objectives of BYMP can be divided into two main categories. One, to address “the structural and systemic forms of racism faced by Black youth in Canada” and to advocate for these youth. The second focuses more on promoting Black youths’ participation in the Canadian job market, often through career mentorship. While this second objective prepares youth for a career,

oftentimes, programs do little to prepare youth to confront and challenge the racism present in their daily lives. This second objective was identified as being the most prominent focus of Canadian BYMP.

Research participants also discussed how funding often dictated the focus of programming, sometimes diverting it away from Afrocentric frameworks. The agendas of funding agencies and organizations, along with the conditions that often accompany the funding, often prioritize the interests and benefits of companies and funding agencies over the well-being or cultural needs of the Black youth they aim to serve. Some directors spoke about how funding agencies use these programs “to achieve equity, diversity, and inclusivity goals that improve their corporate image,” but show little care about the youth once they have been enrolled in the program. Such programs may even act to assimilate Black youth into the capital culture, and/or alienate them from their roots.

The authors urge programs to reclaim “mentorship as a mode of cultural preservation and hubs for political strategizing against exploitative market forces”. They propose doing this by embracing Afrocentric mentorship approaches to foster cultural transmission and emphasize shared values, including ethics of care and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Why does this research matter?

This research highlights how Eurocentric and colonial approaches to mentoring in BYMP may serve as a tool of assimilation, causing harm. Instead, supportive approaches to BYMP position mentorship as a tool for cultural preservation, affirmation, and strategic organizing. This article highlights how BYMP need to centre Black voices, have more Black individuals in leadership roles, and operate from an Afrocentric approach that finds strength in Black cultural roots as opposed to assimilating Black youth into the racial neoliberal agenda.

Reference

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