

## Participatory research approaches to studying social capital in youth mentoring: Not the panacea we hoped for

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### ABSTRACT

Participatory approaches have gained broad interest among researchers as a vehicle for allowing participants' experiences and voices to inform research, beyond simply being a source of data. However, participants in mentoring programs, particularly young people, often are not included in research partnerships in a meaningful way. Additionally, practitioners often struggle to translate research findings into program improvements. This paper examines the experiences of a research team collaborating with two user groups: mentoring practitioners, and youth with migrant and refugee backgrounds participating in mentoring programs. With ambitions for meaningful user involvement, our aim was to develop and test a digital intervention for supporting social capital in mentoring. The paper draws primarily upon participant observation and qualitative data from a focus group and panel discussions. While youth voices did inform and shape the research, we also experienced challenges related to youth understanding and engagement. The adult practitioners participated actively but encountered tensions due to their dual roles as co-researchers and mentoring professionals, and resource constraints. Ultimately, a close collaboration enabled the co-creation of adaptations to our research approaches, allowing meaningful participation for some of the youth, and facilitating program changes. This paper offers lessons for researchers wishing to conduct participatory research in the context of youth mentoring, as well as specific suggestions for those studying social capital. It contributes to the discussion on participatory approaches with multicultural youth, presenting critical reflections on our experiences within this mentoring context.

### 1. Introduction

For the past decades, Norway has represented a destination country for thousands of refugees. Although newcomers are resilient in many respects, separation from support networks like family, friends, and familiar institutions can prove challenging, especially for youth transitioning to adulthood (Vervliet et al., 2014; Löbel, 2020). Mentoring programs, which pair newcomers (mentees) with volunteer mentors in a supportive relationship, are thus becoming more common in Europe, aiming to support newcomers and encourage labour market inclusion (Preston et al., 2019). From an international perspective, individuals in Scandinavia and Norway have high levels of social capital, or resources available through their social relationships and networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000; Pichler & Wallace, 2007). However, newcomers generally have weaker social capital than natives (Eriksson et al., 2019). Thus, interventions to promote and strengthen social capital among immigrant youth are particularly important. Previous research suggests that mentoring may contribute to strengthening social capital in various contexts (DuBois & Karcher, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2018; Shier et al., 2018; Alarcón et al., 2021).

While numerous studies and meta-analyses highlight modest benefits

of youth mentoring (DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019), such interventions often operate as a black box with complex processes of change. Some have thus called for new approaches to studying mentoring (Pryce et al., 2021). Additionally, mentees and mentors frequently differ along racial, class, and ethnic lines, with mentors often belonging to the "majority" culture, amplifying implicit power asymmetries, and reproducing rather than decreasing inequality (Albright et al., 2017). This indicates a need for greater attention to principles of social justice in mentoring, and by extension, mentoring research (*ibid*). Participatory approaches may be one way to facilitate this since the inclusion of stakeholders as co-researchers can facilitate empowerment and increased community engagement (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). Nevertheless, we know little about participatory research in the context of mentoring, and few studies of mentoring or social capital utilize an explicitly participatory approach, despite the potential utility of this type of design (for one exception related to social capital see Pittaway et al., 2016). Additionally, participatory approaches have inherent challenges.

This paper presents the experiences of a research team that was committed to user involvement and underlying principles of participatory research in their collaboration with two user groups. The project's

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user groups encompassed mentoring program staff (practitioners) of a social entrepreneurship called Catalysts, some of whom participated as co-researchers in the research team. Catalysts offered a mentoring program to migrant youth, many of whom had refugee backgrounds. These young people represent the second user group in this project. The objective of the project was twofold. First, we aimed to adapt a digital platform to the needs and preferences of program participants (see Radlick et al., 2020a). A second goal was to investigate how youth social capital could be strengthened through this digitally augmented mentoring program.

The research team viewed strong and real user participation as essential to the project, to gain insight into user needs, experiences, and dynamics, both for development of the digital platform, but also in relation to social capital in mentoring. However, despite our ambitions, as the project progressed there was a growing acknowledgement amongst the team that we were missing the mark, particularly regarding youth engagement. Catalysts also experienced ambiguities in their roles as representatives of the research project, in addition to their role as users and advocates for the youth who participated in their program. We were thus forced, on multiple occasions, to (re)evaluate how our activities facilitated or hindered practitioners and the mentees' participation in the research, as well as their relationship to the mentoring programs they voluntarily participated in.

### 1.1. Current study

This paper reflects on our experiences, adaptations, opportunities, and challenges in conducting research *with* rather than *on* two user groups in the context of youth mentoring programs. Because of the researchers' close collaboration with the practitioner user group, it is authored in collaboration with a practitioner, allowing their voices to inform the sharing of lessons learned from our work together. We draw on empirical material collected from a retrospective focus group interview and conference panel discussions with youth and program staff, supplemented by participant observation. We ask:

What challenges and opportunities emerged in this participatory research on mentoring?

What lessons can be drawn from these experiences to inform future participatory research, particularly in the context of mentoring?

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Participatory research

We understand participatory research to be a process where researchers and participants develop topics of interest, goals and approaches, share in gathering, analysis, and interpretation of data and/or implement and spread results in a way that promotes positive change in the lives of those involved (Kidd & Kral, 2005, p. 187). This entails a spectrum of strategies which vary in the nature and extent of user involvement and with regards to the underpinning philosophy of participation: consulting, involvement, triangulation of results, or full collaboration and inclusion at all stages (Dona, 2007; Raanaas et al., 2020; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Overall, participatory approaches have been suggested as one means for managing power imbalances and ethical dilemmas in research with migrant and refugee youth, by allowing young people whose lives are affected by the area under study to inform research topics, approaches, interpretation of findings, and potential solutions at multiple stages in a project (Mirra et al., 2016). Participatory approaches can have positive outcomes for youth, organizations, and the community (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). However, there are also inherent relational, scientific, and ethical challenges (Kim, 2016; Richards-Schuster et al., 2021). Frameworks at the institutional level for obtaining informed consent can both obfuscate and obstruct, while simultaneously endeavouring to protect research participants (MacKenzie et al., 2007). There can also be asymmetrical

power dynamics between researchers and participants, as well as between research participants themselves, structuring the way participation transpires (Albright et al., 2017). Ensuring real participation, while avoiding tokenism can also be a challenge (Dedding et al., 2021). While the opportunity for young people to exercise their agency and engage as partners in the research might argue for comprehensive inclusion as co-researchers, participation in research is not necessarily interesting or empowering for youth, and some may initially feel sceptical as to what they might contribute (Dona, 2007; Richards-Schuster et al., 2021). Although partner organizations can facilitate initial access to participants for recruitment (Smith et al., 2010), there may be relational barriers between researchers and young people if trust is not fully built, or the parties do not have sufficient time to meet (Kim, 2016).

### 2.2. Mentoring and social capital

While mentoring has long been popular in the United States, research on mentoring for vulnerable groups is relatively new in Norway (Radlick & Mevatne, 2023). In its ideal form, mentoring is a supportive relationship between a younger or unexperienced person (mentee) and older or more experienced non-parental adult (mentor) who provides encouragement and guidance (DuBois & Karcher, 2014). Mentoring can be a means for supporting positive development through interpersonal connections, characterized by trust, mutuality, and empathy (Rhodes, 2005). While the relationship itself may be the main objective, it can also support work towards personal goals (Cavell et al., 2021). Although mentoring programs are generally delivered in-person, electronic mentoring (e-mentoring), or the use of various digital technologies to supplement face to face mentoring relationships, has increased in popularity in recent years, particularly in the wake of COVID-19 (Garinger et al., 2019). Recent research suggests that mentoring can strengthen youth social capital (Schwartz et al., 2018; Shier et al., 2018; Alarcón et al., 2021). This refers to relationships, networks, and resources which individuals have access to, and which are supported by trust and norms of social interaction (Putnam, 2000; Rostila, 2010). Bonding types of social capital encompass relationships between people of a similar social or ethnic group, and can be important for support and belonging, while bridging capital refers to looser relationships between people of different socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds and can help people "get ahead" (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). Newcomers generally have weaker social capital than natives. Mentoring can foster bridging and potentially bonding relationships between majority and minority populations, facilitating integration and building trust, and potentially promoting social mobility (Shier et al., 2018; Alarcón et al., 2021).

## 3. Materials and methods

### 3.1. Project and mentoring intervention

Catalysts initiated contact with researchers to facilitate the development of research-informed content for their existing mentoring programs, including a digital platform. The overarching aim of this research-practitioner partnership was to assess user needs for mentoring broadly and digital support to develop a digital platform, and then pilot test it as part of the existing mentoring program.

Catalysts is a social entrepreneurship started in 2011. Social entrepreneurs combine non-profit business-oriented principles with a mission to improve society (Dacin et al. 2011). Catalysts' programs are strength-based, designed around principles of positive psychology (Snyder et al. 2016) and utilize modules over a six-month period. Their objective is to promote increased youth self-esteem, social capital, mutual inter-cultural understanding, and improved opportunities for the future. Program coordinators are responsible for program operations and implementation. They have responsibility for recruiting volunteer adults (mentors) and youth (mentees), training them, and providing

support throughout the relationship.

### 3.2. Participants

Two user groups comprised the main participants working together with researchers on this mentoring project: adult mentoring program coordinators (“PCs”) and mentee youth with migrant and refugee backgrounds. The program practitioners most central to this project consisted of 4 women and 2 men, with diverse backgrounds. Aside from the CEO, all had been working in the program for 2 years or fewer at project start. The CEO and the lead program coordinator and co-author of this paper (hereafter referred to as “LPC”) were integrated as part of the research project team, and as co-researchers. Members of the team collaborated closely, meeting at least weekly to discuss the project, mentee feedback, and to brainstorm to create and implement necessary adaptations to challenges experienced underway. [Table 1](#) provides additional information on this user group and their roles.

The mentee young people represent the second user group, ranging in age from 16 to 25 years old. They were recruited to the mentoring program from local schools, participating on a voluntary basis. The mentoring organization does not keep statistics on mentee nationality, and it was common for the youth to have lived in several places before coming to Norway. We did not ask directly about or record information on country of origin, instead allowing the youth to initiate. Many who participated in the study had lived in countries in the Middle East or Africa. Some were unaccompanied minors, while others arrived with family members; all with migrant or refugee backgrounds. Length of time in Norway varied from only a few months to several years; almost all were still in the process of learning Norwegian. The three youths most heavily involved in the project were all between ages 18 and 25 with varied countries of origin. Each engaged in several of the following tasks: consulted on the survey, developed blog posts, engaged in digital platform moderation, and participated in developing topics and/or in conference panel discussions. Because the young people arrived from different countries, and thus had diverse mother tongues, we used languages we all had in common: Norwegian and sometimes English.

### 3.3. Reflexivity

Both authors of this paper are white women with academic backgrounds in the social sciences. Neither had used participatory approaches before. The first co-author (RLR) is a first-generation immigrant to Norway and worked together on this project with a shifting team of 2–3 other researchers and research assistants. She had no experience with the mentoring organization or refugee youth prior to the project, but previously conducted research on integration programs. The second co-author (SP) worked in the organization as the LPC until August 2021, and is a second-generation immigrant. Our experiences/

analyses were based in our implicit differing expectations of participant involvement. RLR had an outsider perspective and came from a quantitative pragmatic tradition but was very open to potential benefits of a participatory approach. As program staff, SP had an insider perspective, deeply passionate for work with migrant youth and viewing the research from a constructivist perspective and as one way to facilitate involvement, belonging, and understanding in the programs.

### 3.4. Data collection and analyses

The empirical basis for this paper stems from two broad types of data: 1) participant observation and 2) qualitative panel discussion and focus group data capturing retrospective reflections from the two user groups on their participation in the research project. The project itself had an objective of developing and testing a digital platform to complement the in-person mentoring program in strengthening youth social capital. Social capital was to be measured primarily via administration of a web-survey at program start and end (specific measures described in [Radlick et al., 2020b](#)). Two workshops were also developed as a supplement. These were recorded on video and transcribed. We also conducted focus groups and user testing of the digital platform. The project was approved by the Ethics Board at Oslo University Hospital.

Participant observation of 6 practitioners and 30 mentees across 3 mentee cohorts was conducted over the course of 18 months, with each mentee cohort participating in the program for 6 months ([Kawulich, 2005](#)). Most observations occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Observation was conducted at mentoring training, events like goodbye parties, meetings with participants, survey administration, and introductory meetings where youth were recruited for project participation and were combined with informal conversations, where relevant. These were not recorded, but unstructured field notes were taken, with key insights discussed at weekly project meetings. Our observations did not have an explicit focus on user participation, but instead focused on general reflections on relations between the user groups and different aspects of the research.

In addition to observational data, we solicited qualitative reflections from the user groups on their participation in the research; this took place during the pandemic. Insight into mentees’ retrospective experiences was solicited via research conference panel discussions and preparatory meetings between the authors of this paper and former mentees. This provided insight into the youths’ perspectives on their own participation retrospectively and suggestions on better facilitating involvement. We collected retrospective reflections from the mentoring staff user group in several ways. A conference panel discussion with 2 practitioner users and research team members allowed us to reflect upon the collaboration and explore how research findings could be implemented. A focus group interview with 3 staff members including the LPC provided a forum for discussing different aspects of the research process

**Table 1**  
Description of key practitioner participants.

Practitioner-participant	Role
CEO	Initiated project Responsible for all program operations Participation in weekly project meetings
LPC	Main contact for the research, co-author of this paper Coordinating programs (recruiting and supporting mentees and mentors) Participation in weekly project meetings
PC	Coordinating programs Recruiting youth to research Survey design and administration
PC	Coordinating programs Survey design and administration
PC	Coordinating programs Recruiting youth to research
Technical development manager	Main responsibility for digital platform Participation in weekly meetings

related to individual practitioner experiences, as well as perceptions of the mentees' experiences. The panel discussions and the focus group interview were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed by extracting key themes (Creswell, 2014). Norwegian quotations are translated to English. In the thematic analysis, both authors and a research assistant read the transcriptions to familiarize themselves with the material. The assistant broadly coded the focus group discussion. RLR coded focus group, panel discussions, and relevant segments of field notes using NVivo software, identifying text relating to participation in the research, including specific research phases and aspects relevant to participation. Codings between the research assistant and RLR were compared and refined. They were then discussed between the co-authors to ensure agreement on main themes. These main themes derived from the data are used as lenses for viewing our experiences.

## 4. Results

In this section we present our experiences in conducting participatory research with the practitioner and mentee user groups. These are organized according to four themes identified in our data: 1) Understanding of the project 2) Roles and tasks 3) Engagement and Agency 4) Results of participation.

### 4.1. Understanding of the project

A first core theme in our data related to participants' *understanding* of the research project. Subthemes include: communication challenges and resource constraints.

#### 4.1.1. Communication challenges

Communication challenges were especially noticeable during the project recruitment phase. Recruitment occurred at introductory meetings between mentees and PCs, with researchers present. Although requirements for informed consent have an explicit intention of informing and protecting participants from harm, we perceived this as being confusing, and sometimes alienating for the young people. For example, the required text in consent forms related to storage and anonymization of data was confusing and not in line with the youths' concerns. After a detailed verbal explanation, some simply signed the form without reading it in detail. Several of the mentees who participated actively in the project retrospectively commented that they didn't feel the need to read the entire consent form or understand details about the research because they trusted the PCs and knew that they wouldn't lead them astray (Mentees B and J, Panel discussion). We also experienced communication challenges regarding the digital platform. In discussions with the practitioners, there was an acknowledgement that recruitment could be difficult due to the abstractness of mentoring (since the youth generally did not understand what mentoring was prior to participation)

and how technology could be relevant in this context. Because of this lack of understanding, other mentees abstained from participation in the digital component. Several of the PCs opined with frustration this abstention appeared to not be an informed decision.

In these initial meetings, we thus became aware of the relevance of these challenges in communication of the research project. This was notable at a meeting when a mentee interjected, "excuse me, but what IS research?" (Mentee A). This question forced us to (re)consider how we communicated about informed consent, but also the project and participation more generally, particularly amongst youth who overall had no previous understanding of social sciences research. Efforts to communicate could also backfire: "The more I talked about this, the more skeptical and disconnected the young people became. They started to get bored, look at other things, pick up their phone, etc" (LPC, focus group). As an adaptation to this challenge, and in consultation with the practitioners and several mentees, we created a short, animated film (Fig. 1) to show at recruitment. The intention was to facilitate understanding of the project and consent form they were signing by providing a visual starting point. The film also introduced the research team, provided a basic explanation of what social sciences research is, and presented the research project objectives, including social capital. Mentees who viewed it responded positively.

#### 4.1.2. Resource constraints

Efforts to facilitate understanding of the research were sometimes limited by resource constraints, as staff had to ensure sufficient time for mentoring program activities: "We talked about the fact that we were going to have a research project, but I don't think [staff] fully realized how much time was required for this to make sense to [the youth], and for them to understand what that process entailed." (PC-H, focus group). PCs were sometimes disappointed that the mentees had little interest in understanding something which could potentially benefit them, and that they didn't have enough time to make them understand. As one stated: "So there were a lot of things that came into play. I think that there was a lot of 'hassle'. Once we got the young people to an information meeting and start-up meeting, there were many other things we had to work on before we could start with consent and all that" (PC-T, focus group).

### 4.2. Roles and tasks

A second theme identified in our data related to Roles and tasks in the project. This coincides with two specific subthemes: Division of labor and Blending of roles.

#### 4.2.1. Division of labor

Overall, the CEO and the LPC were most involved in the research. The LPC coordinated actively with the other staff in recruitment, survey development and data collection, and communicated information about



Fig. 1. Stills from the animated film featuring a mentee, mentor, and researchers.



the project. Although the LPC had the primary research role within the mentoring organization, the other PCs were involved in all research phases. Due to this division of labor, two PCs expressed a wish that they could have been more involved in the details of the project: “Sometimes it does not suit the research to be so involved. But for my own part, I think that both I and the project would have gotten more out of [being more involved]” (PC-H, focus group). While the PCs recognized the necessity of having a division of tasks and labour between them and the LPC, the PCs had the ultimate responsibility for their mentees. Thus although there was a formal division of labour regarding research activities, in practice there was still a feeling of deep caring for the youths’ experiences with the research on the part of the PCs (PC-T, focus group).

#### 4.2.2. Blending of roles

Despite the formal division of labor, the PCs experienced a blending of roles, coordinating programs in their professional role as well as being active participants in and users of the research. We thus perceived the mentees as blending the research and mentoring program throughout the project, struggling to understand which activities were part of the program and which were research. As one PC stated: “Even if it was explained, and [LPC] came in, that division of roles became skewed for [the youth]” (PC-T, focus group). From the mentees’ perspective, they wondered, “Who is this lady that came into the room, what is she talking about? I thought we were here for mentoring.” (LPC, focus group).

This blending of roles was viewed as sometimes being beneficial, but also producing tensions amongst the practitioners. For example, there was uncertainty whether the youth wanted to participate in the research due to being interested in the project, or due to the power dynamics between staff and mentees. As one stated:

*[Regarding] the youths’ refusal to participate [by not signing the form], my feeling is that they don’t quite understand what they’re being asked, and don’t want to use time to understand. Because they aren’t invested in the relation to me, or they don’t see what benefits them. It’s very important that we support their freedom to participate or not. But I think it’s so disappointing when the rejection is due to an unfounded understanding. Then again, should they do it because they have a good relationship with us? That would be wrong too* (LPC, focus group).

#### 4.3. Engagement and agency

A third theme we identified was Engagement, particularly amongst the mentees, in three aspects of the research: digital platform, social capital, and dissemination. In conjunction, youth *agency*, in choosing to participate (or not), was also relevant.

##### 4.3.1. Engagement in the digital platform

We endeavoured to encourage active engagement from both user groups in developing and testing the digital platform for mentoring, while also respecting their agency to not engage. Using a previously designed platform for mental health (see Gammon et al., 2017) as a starting point, the team worked to co-create a new platform, using principles of user-centred design. Focus was on mentees’ stated needs and experiences in the context of mentoring and how technology could support these needs. One key theme which emerged in the discussions and workshops with the youth was the idea of “Paying it forward” (Radlick et al., 2020a). Mentees expressed a desire to share what they learned in the context of the program with other young people, either those who did not have access to a mentor, or future participants. Based on these wishes and a strongly articulated need for connection, a key digital element was to be a discussion forum. Here, mentees could discuss their experiences with their mentor and get advice from peers, as well as share more general topics. This would allow the youth to connect, build trust, and further strengthen their social capital; all of which were needs articulated by the youth themselves in the formative stages

of research (*ibid*). With support from the LPC, we recruited a former mentee as a forum moderator with responsibility for creating forum posts, thus setting the research agenda.

Ultimately, approximately 10 mentees from the third cohort were on-boarded to the digital platform. Over the 6-month long program period, the mentee moderator created over 30 posts in the forum. The digital platform and especially the forum, were intended to be an important part of the research and were a strategic focus for the mentoring program. However, although there appeared to be strong enthusiasm during testing of multiple prototypes, few mentees used the digital platform, despite the engagement and strong efforts of our young forum moderator. In talking with the youth to explore why, issues of usability and user experience were highlighted. Many also articulated a general lack of interest and strong preference for in-person connection with the mentor. A mentee postulated retrospectively:

*I feel there are people who took time and like, they cared about this experience enough. And maybe some others did care, but they just decided to walk away with what they got and- it’s just- I feel like people are different, you can’t just get somebody to speak about something that they don’t consider important enough? It sucks, but it happens.* (Mentee-B).

The lack of engagement presented a dilemma for the practitioners and researchers, underscoring the element of *agency*. How much more should we encourage mentees to participate in the forum, thus contributing to platform development, despite clear indications they were not interested? The team discussed initial experiences and considered potential ways to increase adoption. Ultimately, the researchers and practitioners agreed that we would not push the mentees to use it, respecting their agency, despite the consequences this would have for the research and the mentoring program. Instead these findings could be used to build an improved platform.

##### 4.3.2. Engagement in studying social capital

Because of the challenges experienced in engaging the mentees in contributing to the digital platform, assessing how the mentoring program could support strengthening of mentees’ social capital became more important. Social capital was identified early on as an underlying theme expressed by the youth themselves, in a desire for connection with others around them, as well as support in their pursuit of specific educational and career goals (Radlick et al., 2020a). However, challenges in youth engagement persisted. The intention was to administer a short web-survey on social capital to all mentees at program start and conclusion. The researchers, with support of the LPC, elicited input from staff and mentees on a pilot version of the survey. Verbal presentation of the questions and solicitation of feedback allowed the researchers to obtain reflections on the questions asked, strengthening relevance, and assess the appropriateness of the language used, again endeavouring to facilitate youth engagement and ownership. One of the mentees who had been heavily involved at this stage opined retrospectively that they were pleased to see their suggested changes in the revised version of the survey (Mentee-B). Additionally, we instituted a small financial incentive to increase response rates and to show respect for the youths’ time in sharing their experiences. The PCs reported preferring the new social capital measures compared to their pre-project measures. They found the concept very relevant to their own work and wanted it incorporated into the organization (PC-T; LPC, focus group).

However, most youth did not exhibit enthusiastic engagement. One PC felt it was “a downer” encouraging mentees to respond to the survey. Many mentees seemed to have minimal interest and little understanding of the social capital term itself, despite understanding the importance of networks and personal resources (PC-H, focus group). The LPC initiated a discussion with the other members of the research team, stating that the “survey creates a bit of stress...[and] challenges [our] trust with the mentees”. Her perception of the youths’ lack of engagement led her to question the survey, but especially the negative consequences for the youths’ experiences in the mentoring program more broadly. One the

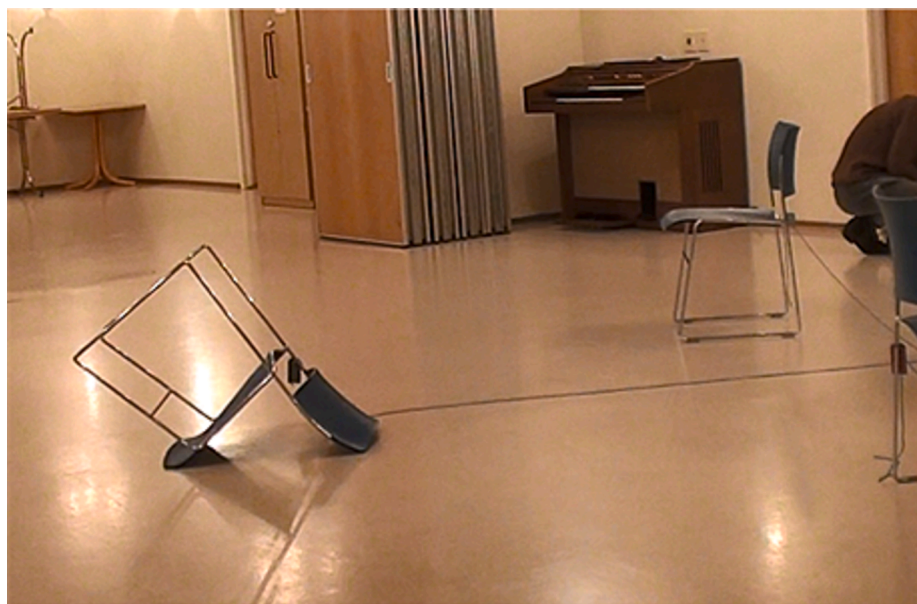


Fig. 2. Social capital workshop.

one hand, this challenging of the research methods (and power dynamics) was surprising to the researchers. However, upon reflection, we appreciated the honest feedback, which allowed us to adapt the social capital study to better engage the youth and better integrate the concept as part of the program. Thus, PCs collaborated closely with the team to develop “social capital workshops”. The objective was to provide a broader basis for understanding the relevance of the content in the survey, as well as to engage the mentees in actively reflecting upon their relationships. Having mentees use the physical space to supplement verbal discussions, was also suggested as being useful for new language learners.

The workshops began with an icebreaker exercise, with mentees building a figurine to represent themselves. Next, the youth were guided in mapping their relationships with others in the physical space (Fig. 2) using chairs and yarn. Emotionally close relationships were depicted by using chairs physically closer to themselves (figurine) or with tighter string. Weaker ties were shown with the chair being further away or with looser string attachments. Various ways of depicting geographic locations of contacts in other countries were used. In addition to the PCs, two members of the research team were present to help guide the exercise, using examples from survey questions, followed by a discussion of the different relationships, resources, and trust. The social capital survey was subsequently administered.

From the research perspective, the workshops provided a new source of data for understanding mentee social capital, in their own words. This enabled new insights into other aspects of social capital beyond what was in the survey, such as reciprocity on the part of the mentees, but also how the mentees viewed linking ties developed through social media. The team noted that some of the youth appeared to gain a greater awareness of the resources and individuals already present in their lives, including their mentors, as well as a better understanding of the topic. From the practitioner perspective, the workshop was viewed primarily as a program activity, allowing mentees to use their imagination, and become more aware of their resources, for the mentors to gain insight and better understanding of their mentees’ background, and as a trust-building exercise. Still, some of the mentees chose not to participate and we respected their agency.

#### 4.3.3. Engagement in dissemination

User interaction with and involvement in sharing insights from the project was a consideration from the outset in our plan for facilitating

active participation. However, specific dissemination approaches were left open, allowing user groups to decide. We discussed with both groups the “best” way to share findings with stakeholders, such as young people and mentoring practitioners. The intention was to facilitate de facto youth participation in sharing experiences in the research project and with mentoring more generally in their own words, in line with “paying it forward”. For this purpose, we created a blog. The LPC was strongly engaged, using considerable resources to coordinate mentee blog posts. She identified and recruited mentees to share their experiences, discussed ideas for content with the rest of the research team and with the youth, and managed the practicalities of organizing content creation. In some of the blog entries, the youth interviewed their classmates, for example, on the theme of “what is research” or on the use of technology during the pandemic. Another former mentee conducted an interview with the former leader of this project. In this area, the mentees engaged as fellow researchers, and reported findings in their own voices. They described finding the blog post writing interesting and thought provoking. Catalysts promoted blog posts on social media, researchers shared the blog with other researchers, and the mentees keenly followed the statistics on their readership.

The project team also planned a conference towards the end of the project period, and the practitioners were heavily involved as equal partners in design and execution. In conjunction, former mentees were invited to create and partake in their own conference panel. The aim was to share perspectives on meaningful engagement, as well as suggestions to support participation in research. The LPC again had a central role in organizing this. Based on discussions between the LPC, a researcher, and the youth, the group selected topics to address in the panel session which the youth deemed relevant to their experiences. These included mentees’ understanding of research, reflection on their roles in the project, potential positive bias in data collection, how the youth saw their value to and contributions in the research project, and the racial homogeneity of the research team.

#### 4.4. Results of participation

A fourth theme identified in our data relates to results of participation in the research for both user groups. Subthemes include Mentee learning and empowerment, Organizational learning and legitimacy, and Lessons for future projects.

#### 4.4.1. Mentee learning and empowerment

During preparatory discussions for the conference, and the panel itself, the mentees reflected on their own involvement in the research project. In this context they highlighted positive benefits related to their participation, particularly in relation to learning and connection. A commonality was a change in understanding of what research is and how it is conducted. As one mentee explained:

*Well, my idea about research has obviously changed after being involved...Before ... whenever I hear "research" I think about laboratory rats and people in gowns, and – you know laboratories, but now I know that it [deals with] other stuff as well... (Mentee-K, panel)*

The mentees also explicitly discussed what they would take away from having participated in the research. While one described the benefits of having a mentor, suggesting a blending of the research and the mentoring program, another mentee stated:

*I've learned a lot of stuff that I didn't know that existed before...And now, becoming a researcher is an option that I consider for myself (Mentee-B, panel).*

We also engaged in a dialogue with the practitioners surrounding how the mentees might have benefitted from their participation in the research. An initial objective of the LPC had been empowerment: "I wanted the participation in the research project to be "empowering" [for the mentees], now they have an opportunity to learn what [research institution] is, how a research project works, how to be part of a project that benefits others" (focus group). The practitioners ultimately viewed empowerment from participation as something real, but for only a few of the youth, although mentees could experience feelings of awareness, mastery, and inclusion, and have overall positive experiences. According to one practitioner:

*Including a youth perspective in the research, to talk with and not about, will perhaps have a lot to say for them. Maybe not here and now, but it can be part of a change of attitude about oneself and about society (PC-T, focus group).*

#### 4.4.2. Organizational learning and legitimacy

Despite having varying connections to the different research activities, program staff emphasized the benefits of their participation at the organizational level, including learning, with a strong desire to incorporate the research findings to benefit the organization. Involvement in the research project provided close ties to researchers and research in progress. This feedback allowed the practitioners to better tailor and improve their program activities with the youth, influencing changes in how the program measured their work, as well as the underlying logic of change. One practitioner described these positive benefits, despite the challenges in engaging the youth with the first version of the digital platform:

*When we had a collaboration with [the researchers] for example, even though...it wasn't the same result as we intended. But I still think that the collaboration was fruitful, because we still have gotten some ... really good tools out of it, we have the social capital survey, [and] we now have a really good digital platform (PC-D, panel).*

However, the research could also be used to legitimize, acting also symbolically, rather than only influencing the mechanics of the program activities or learning, as one practitioner elaborated:

*We have 'agency', but we might not have had a clear enough idea about our objectives in being part of this project. [But] I think we definitely have benefited from it...It has given us legitimacy [in grant applications], even if we can't know for sure that's why we've gotten the grant...we mention it in basically every application (LPC, focus group).*

#### 4.4.3. Lessons for future projects

Explicit suggestions for facilitating meaningful participation in the future were proposed by the youth. In discussing how to conduct research *with* rather than *on*, a salient issue was recognizing and encouraging the youths' contributions. Here, they emphasized the importance of acknowledging the usefulness of their participation in the project:

*I think one of the key—and most important things is...to let the people know that...they're important contributors to the research...So I feel like the more you explain it, and the more you show people that what they're saying is important, the more they would be willing to participate ... And for me too, if I hadn't been told over and over again that what I'm saying is useful and important, I probably would've just stayed quiet. (Mentee-B, panel)*

A different mentee suggested:

*So I think to make sure that you're... making [us] feel like you're working with, and not just on us, the best way is that- you can include everyone in the research group, and not just...some people. So [that] you have a lot of answers possible. (Mentee-J, panel)*

This underscores the importance of including many voices and perspectives, a key ambition in this participatory research.

## 5. Discussion

A main objective of this paper has been to discuss our experiences in applying participatory approaches to studying mentoring. In this regard, four themes, which act as lenses for viewing the use of participatory approaches, were presented. These results underscore challenges in our efforts to meaningfully engage *both* user groups in the research, despite strong ambitions. However, they also suggest some benefits and lessons for future participatory research.

### 5.1. The researcher-practitioner collaboration

The mentoring practitioners, and especially the LPC and the CEO, were active in the research project from conceptualization and agenda-setting to dissemination. Their participation as co-researchers/co-creators enabled transferring findings from research to practice. A main result of the collaboration was the integration of the concept of social capital in program activities and evaluation, with an enhanced focus on youth feedback to inform program development. Additionally, our experiences (and disappointments) with the digital platform provided knowledge and gave inputs for additional development. Program staff underscored that our partnership strengthened the organization's legitimacy in grant applications, as well as in the practitioner community more broadly. These results coincide with outcomes for organizations highlighted in [Shamrova and Cummings' \(2017\)](#) review, which finds influences on organizational culture, greater sensitivity of programs to youth needs, and funding opportunities.

In the participatory research literature, trust is emphasized as an important element in partnership building, foundational to facilitating participation ([Jagosh et al., 2015](#); [Smith et al., 2010](#)). Developing an honest and trusting relationship with the practitioners over time enabled the team to access experiences and insights from the mentees, via our direct observations and interactions, as well as via staff feedback. When we experienced challenges, we were able to openly discuss and adapt our approaches to encourage greater participation and to make data collection more engaging, as others have also done ([Foster-Fishman et al., 2005](#); [Kim, 2016](#)). Although this occasionally challenged traditional power dynamics, it also benefitted the research.

While motivations for using participatory approaches can differ between practitioners and researchers ([Elmore et al., 2019](#)), the team never explicitly discussed our understanding of and objectives in incorporating participatory approaches. Both groups wanted to include



contextual knowledge and multiple perspectives and involve the youth actively in the project, beyond their simply volunteering personal information. For the researchers this also had strong basis in improving the research and facilitating implementation of findings. While the practitioners had an interest in research quality, they operated with a passion for empowerment and learning, which also inspired the researchers. In facilitating youth involvement, they endeavoured to move beyond participation, to *action*, collaborating in encouraging reciprocal reflection and learning, providing future opportunities for *all* program participants (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 346). Thus, while the researchers strove for meaningful participation from *some* of the mentees in all phases of the project, the practitioners desired even more comprehensive engagement and strong action, which preferably included *all* the youth. This small nuance was the source of differing expectations which could have been minimized had we communicated and discussed this explicitly early on in our collaboration.

### 5.2. The challenges of youth participation

While a few youths engaged in a significant way at multiple phases of the research, even co-producing knowledge in specific areas, most had only limited or sporadic participation; this is not uncommon in youth participatory research (Raanaas et al., 2020). We thus experienced a gap between our idealism and the reality of participatory approaches, as Smith et al., (2010) describe.

Understanding of the research project presented a particular barrier. Previous research shows challenges in participation due to participants' backgrounds (Block et al., 2013; Kim, 2016). Similarly, some challenges we experienced were a consequence of language barriers, which complicated communication and may have contributed to a blending of staff roles. There were also cultural differences, contributing to weak understanding of the concept of mentoring, and thus how digital platforms could be relevant in this context.

While trust was developed over time between the researchers and practitioners, trust was not established between the researchers and most of the mentees, due to a limited number of meetings and challenges in mentee engagement. We thus experienced tensions between our strong desire for youth engagement and a need to respect youth agency. This is a challenge highlighted in other literature on participatory approaches; participants often have other priorities, which influence their capacity for participation and engagement (Dona, 2007; Tasker et al., 2010). It was therefore necessary to experiment with various ways of building trust and enthusiasm and strengthening communication to access the experiences and views of the youth. In this study of social capital, program staff leveraged their own at multiple stages, regarding trust already built with the individual mentees in the program. They encouraged honest feedback and engagement in development and implementation of the research components. The process whereby the blog and conference panel were developed underscores the importance of social relations to enable meaningful youth participation, but also how such relations can develop as a result between research team members and youth. Research activities were highly contingent upon the relationship between the staff and the mentees, but also between the researchers and staff. Due to this strong reliance on the practitioners and limited resources, the research project also competed, in some respects, with core program activities.

However, this tight practitioner-researcher collaboration also reinforced a blending between the program and the research project in the eyes of the mentees, due to the program coordinators' multiple roles, something which does not appear to be widely addressed in the literature on participatory research. While this illustrates the degree to which we were able to include the practitioners as co-researchers, it also posed ethical dilemmas. We were careful to treat consent as an ongoing process (see MacKenzie et al., 2007), reiterating when we were engaging in research activities, and ensuring mentees understood that their participation in the mentoring program was not contingent upon participating

in the research (Block et al., 2013). Nevertheless, this seemed to decrease mentee engagement. While deep involvement raised the emotional "stakes" for the practitioners, particularly the LPC, it also made them more disappointed when mentees were unenthusiastic about participating. However, as others have indicated (Tasker et al., 2010), the deeper ownership participants feel, the harder they are willing to work through the challenges; this was our experience also.

### 5.3. Participation: Not the panacea we hoped for, but benefits for some

Although youth are often under-included in early stages of research (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017), we made strong efforts to assess youth needs for mentoring, as well as for digital support. Social capital was identified early on as a theme expressed by the mentees themselves (Radlick et al., 2020a). As Shier et al. (2018) underscore, research often takes a passive view of social capital acquisition, rather than focusing on its mobilization or how youth pursue it. Through the workshops, the team worked to make social capital a more interactive, tangible, and visual, guiding the youth in considering how they could be supported in attaining goals, and what additional contacts might be relevant in this pursuit (*ibid*). While this benefitted the research, it also made participation in this aspect of the research more interesting and a learning experience for some of the youth.

Ultimately some mentees participated actively, in various capacities and at different stages of the research. They informed the development of the digital platform, moderated the forum, provided concrete feedback on the social capital survey, inspired the social capital workshop, selected themes for the blog, conducted interviews, and wrote posts, acting as co-researchers in limited respects. The three youth who participated in the research most extensively expressed positive feelings about their own involvement. They were initially uncertain of their contributions or abilities, and thus sceptical to participating as Richards-Schuster et al. (2021) also describe. However, positive feedback from the research team and especially from the LPC, reinforced the youths' belief in their abilities and willingness to contribute (Tasker et al., 2010). Through participation, they experienced feelings of mastery and gained insight into the research process, developing, to a limited extent, research skills as Shamrova and Cummings (2017) also find. Participation may have also strengthened bridging social capital by giving these mentees repeated contact with and access to researchers (as in Guribye, 2013) and staff. This sparked consideration of research as a potential career path for one mentee. It also allowed some young migrant and refugee voices to be heard, influencing the research, as well as the mentoring programs, where racial or socio-economic disparities in matching are often present as Albright et al. (2017) suggest, and mentee voices are often not included in program design and implementation. These results coincide with the broader literature on participatory research outcomes related to increases in youth knowledge, learning, self-efficacy or empowerment, career, interpersonal aspects, and feeling valued (Dedding et al., 2021; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

Although more mentees might have participated beyond informing or consulting as described by Vaughn and Jacquez (2020), we eventually concluded that broad involvement was not realistic due to limited time and resources, challenges in understanding, and minimal previous interactions with the research team in line with Dedding et al. (2021). Over time there was recognition that the mentees didn't need detailed understanding of how the different components of the research inter-related, or to have a strong interest in the nuances of bridging and bonding social capital to have real and ethical participation, despite this being a reasonable aspiration. Mentee involvement wasn't necessarily tokenistic just because only *some* of the youths were active, or in small, specific parts (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Rather, this respected their agency and the limitations in which the project operated as in Kim (2016). Overall, in line with Tritter and McCallum (2006), we believe that the *process* of user involvement, not just extent or outcome, is a useful way of viewing participation in this mentoring research project.



A few limitations should be noted. First, the small sample size of youth in a mentoring program run by a single social entrepreneurship, as well as the small numbers observed and interviewed limits generalisability. The program was already established; thus results might differ in the context of a new organization. Additionally, youth self-select to the program, participating voluntarily. Despite inherent challenges which may be associated with having a refugee background (Vervliet et al., 2014), we found the mentees to be motivated and resilient. Insights from this group's experiences may thus not apply to other youth. The authors of this paper were heavily involved in the research, with the LPC acting as an informant; although we endeavour to take a critical perspective, this positionality naturally influences our interpretations. Finally, the research team had a priori ideas about the relevance of social capital within mentoring, which were supported in our early interactions with the youth and practitioners.

#### 5.4. Future research using participatory approaches

Based on our experiences, we conclude with several suggestions and points for reflection for those considering applying participatory approaches in the context of researcher-practitioner collaborations:

- Assess at the outset what degree of participation is desirable and realistic. How might participation “look”? In what phase of the project (planning, execution, dissemination)?
- Consider what you hope to achieve in using participatory approaches. How might participants, stakeholders, and research benefit? How might traditional power dynamics be challenged?
- Allocate significant time and resources to communicate about the project, facilitate understanding, and develop trusting relationships. What capacity is there for participation? How does this coincide with the degree of participation desired?
- Properly compensate and/or acknowledge participants' contributions and expertise.

#### 6. Conclusions

Mentoring research has been criticized for generating findings which are not readily translated into improving program practices. Our experiences indicate that participatory approaches are a fruitful addition for engaging youth voices and facilitating program improvements, making research findings more relevant and implementable for stakeholders. Despite challenges, the practitioners and some of the youth experienced benefits from their participation. Overall, our experiences underscore the need for flexibility and openness to adaptation underway, but also highlight the benefits of a close relationship between researchers and practitioners in conducting participatory research on mentoring. While participatory approaches are clearly not a panacea, they can facilitate meaningful involvement for some young people, and positive value for mentoring programs focused on supporting these youth.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Rebecca Lynn Radlick:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Sarah Przedpelska:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Sarah Przedpelska is a former employee of Catalysts Association who ran the mentoring programs described in this paper, and Catalysts Technologies, a spin-off from Catalysts Association. She was employed by Catalysts until August 2021 and is not an employee at the time of this article's publication. Catalysts Technologies holds the rights to

commercialize any digital tools resulting from this research. The other coauthor has no conflicts of interest.

#### Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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