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Navigating the margins: How a culturally responsive and relevant pedagogical framework can inform the creation of a positive developmental context for African American male youth

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how a program that provides race-specific training and mentoring to African American male adolescents aligns with the principles of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The paper draws on data from qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2011 and 2012 with 16 youth participants of an out-of-school program called the STRIVE Empowerment Program for African American Boys. Findings suggest that while STRIVE attempts to promote the positive development of African American male youth in a culturally relevant and responsive manner, the program is structured in such a fashion that it may complicate this process and, perhaps, even negate key outcomes associated with positive developmental outcomes for the adolescents it serves.

***Keywords*:** African American, youth, culturally relevant, out-of-school programs

Youth and their developmental trajectories cannot be separated from the economic, social, and political contexts in which they are immersed (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006). African American male youth experience particularly challenging circumstances as they navigate their way through their personal social worlds and broader social contexts during adolescence due to interlocking systems of oppression that disproportionately disadvantage members of this demographic. For example, African American male youth experience higher rates of school discipline referrals and punishment, special education tracking, and academic failure than any other group of youth in American society (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Ferguson, 2000; Schott Foundation, 2004; Skiba, Peterson & Williams, 1997); U.S. Department of Education, 2012). African American males also come into contact with and are penalized by the justice system more frequently than any other demographic (Mendel, 2011; Testa, 2007; West, 2010). Moreover, cultural images often represent African American males as

criminals, which can unfairly ascribe deviant identities to members of this demographic (Covington, 2010) and result in disproportionate scrutiny and surveillance (Deutsch, 2008; Noguera, 2008).

Several out-of-school youth programs seek to address the challenges faced by young African American males as they make their way through adolescence and navigate these institutional practices and cultural representations. Out-of-school youth programming as a developmental context for youth has been a topic of increasing interest in the United States (Deutsch, 2008; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kayitsinga & Villarruel, 2008; Mahoney, Larson & Eccles, 2005; Vandell, Pierce & Dadisman, 2005). Some research has focused specifically on after-school programs as developmental contexts for marginalized youth (Deutsch, 2008; Kayitsinga & Villarruel, 2008). Many of these studies focus on out-of-school programs that utilize positive youth development (PYD) frameworks. PYD models entail an asset-based approach to youth programming that builds on youths' strengths and competencies rather than honing in and focusing only on risk factors in their lives. Outcomes associated with positive youth development are typically referred to as the 5 C's of PYD, which are competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas & Lerner, 2005). Such programs have been found to positively affect youth development outcomes, such as a sense of self-worth, positive identity, academic competence, and interpersonal skills (Lerner et al., 2005). While a PYD framework is an important element of quality youth programming in general, more than an asset-based approach to programming may be required in settings targeting particularly marginalized groups of youth. Thus, in addition to focusing on youths' assets, the social context in which youth develop must be fully considered in the design and implementation of youth programs (Lee, Spencer & Harpalani, 2003; Thomas, Davidson & McAdoo, 2008). Ginwright and Cammarota (2006) argue that within out-of-school programs, "the youth development process should be conceptualized as a collective response to the social marginalization of young people" (p. xvii). Although several programs may focus on both youths' assets and the social context in which they are embedded already, a framework for creating such programs may be helpful for organizations to consider in developing or enhancing their current youth programs.

Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy has emerged as an important framework to consider in creating positive developmental contexts for youth that build on assets and take social context into consideration. Such a pedagogical orientation draws on adolescents' lived experiences and knowledge to create meaningful and engaging contexts for learning and development, while also creating a space for the development of sociopolitical consciousness. Geneva Gay (2000) suggests that culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy should create settings that are comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, validating, transformative, and emancipatory. Research that has examined the efficacy of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy has demonstrated that youth develop greater academic proficiency, cultural competency, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994). For example, one study found that in particular regard to sociopolitical consciousness, students developed a more complex and nuanced understanding of race, agency, and power relations (Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011). While culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy has been a particularly helpful framework for bridging individual

agency and social context within formal educational realms, the role that such a framework can play in relation to adolescent development and well-being has not been examined widely in out-of-school programs for youth with the exception of some out-of-school youth organizing initiatives for social justice (Ginwright, 2004; Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Lacoe, 2006).

We contend that culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy can be used as a tool to create an environment that promotes the goals of positive youth development while also creating space for youth to explore their identity in relation to the social and structural factors influencing their lives. In this article, we first review the literature regarding how out-of-school contexts can influence the process of adolescent development and then discuss the theoretical role that culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy can play in enhancing such positive developmental out-of-school contexts for youth. Subsequently, we engage in a case study of the STRIVE Empowerment Program for African American Boys,[2] seeking to answer the following questions: 1) how does a youth program that provides race-specific training and mentoring to African American male youth address the specific issues that have been shown to put minority youth at disproportionate risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system?; and, 2) how does a program tailored to the needs and experiences of African American male youth align with the principles of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy? Through the evaluative lens of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, we examine how the STRIVE program attempts to create a positive developmental context for African American male youth. We draw on data from qualitative fieldwork we conducted with 16 youth members of STRIVE, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the STRIVE program in relation to each facet of Gay's (2000) framework of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy. We find that while STRIVE seeks to promote the positive development of African American male youth through a curriculum that is designed to be relevant to participants' needs and experiences, the program is structured in such a manner that it may complicate this process and, perhaps, even negate key outcomes associated with positive developmental outcomes. We believe this case study is informative for practitioners and researchers alike in illustrating how programs for marginalized youth can use a framework of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy to create a more positive developmental context for adolescents.

Out-of-school youth programs as developmental contexts

Adolescence is characterized by the complex and often tumultuous transition from childhood into adulthood. A main developmental task of adolescence is identity integration (Erikson, 1959, 1968), which involves the development of an established inner sense of self-concept in addition to the ability to publicly present different facets of one's identity and personality. This process of identity formation is influenced by individual understandings of self, interpersonal relationships, and broader structural forces (Deutsch, 2008). The process of identity integration is complicated for minority youth, who not only need to develop an individuated sense of self but also must negotiate the broader social constructions and understandings of various identity markers, such as race and gender, which may differ from their own understanding of their identity. W. E. B. Dubois (1903)

[2] This is a pseudonym

discusses this as the development of a "double consciousness" wherein marginalized youth must move between contexts that expect different portrayals of identity. The intersection of gender, race, and class, among other key facets of social identity, must be considered in relation to one another in order to better understand the unique context of growth and development affecting African American male youth. Deutsch (2008) eloquently describes this process of identity integration in relation to the intersectional identities of marginalized youth as such:

> For youth growing up at the intersection of marginalized social categories, the task of identity construction poses additional challenges to those confronted by their majority peers. For such teens, identity development and integration require negotiating other people's views of them. Those views may not accurately represent who they are. This demands an ability to balance understanding of such negative views with strategies for resistance to them (p. 190)

This complex process of identity formation and integration, particularly for African American male youth, must be understood in relation to the contexts in which they operate. Several scholars argue that the social contexts of identity development for marginalized youth in the United States are mostly toxic and oppressive (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov & Sealand, 1993; Deutsch, 2008; Garabarino, 1995; Ginwright & James, 2002). For African American male youth, this is evident when we consider the aforementioned research regarding the disproportionate consequences of inequality facing this demographic. Due to this reality, it is important to explore how out-of-school contexts can be intentionally structured to create a positive and supportive space where youth can actively explore and construct their complex and multifaceted identities.

Several studies suggest that out-of-school programs and initiatives have the potential to provide healthy, positive, and holistic developmental contexts for adolescents (Deutsch, 2008; Nissen, 2011; Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman & Davison, 2010). For example, Deutsch's (2008) four-year study of East Side Boys and Girls' Club. Specifically, Deutsch found that East Side created a safe space in which youth could "play with" and "try on" various identities, aiding in the process of identity integration. Moreover, she found that East Side created a space where youth could confront social constructions of identity and stereotypes and formulate ways to resist and reconstruct these identities. The relationships that are built among youth participants and between youth and staff via activities and other interactions in such programs are particularly influential in creating such positive developmental spaces for youth (Deutsch, 2008; Nissen, 2011; Reclaiming Futures Seattle-King County WA, 2010). These relationships assist youth in building supportive and healthy relationships with adults (Reclaiming Futures Seattle-King County WA, 2010) and also help youth negotiate their identity in relation to their peers and adult staff, as well as their identity in relation to their race, class, gender, and other important facets of their identity (Deutsch, 2008).

Deutsch (2008) urges researchers and practitioners alike to recognize that "it is a social responsibility to continue to work to link theory and practice, to create spaces that nurture youth in constructing positive, holistic identities" (p. 200). In doing so, it is important to consider programmatic frameworks that may enhance the potential

of youth programs to meet the developmental needs of the adolescents they serve. Many out-of-school programs address the needs of the youth with whom they work through a PYD framework, which entails an asset-based approach to youth programming that build on youths' strengths and competencies. We argue that a framework of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy may enhance the ability of after-school programs to meet the unique and complex needs of marginalized youth by creating a rich context for youth to explore their multifaceted identities in relation to their peers and broader society, and should therefore be considered as a part of the dialogue regarding the creation of positive developmental contexts in out-of-school programs.

Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy and youth programming

Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy is an important framework to consider in creating a developmental context that meets the unique needs and addresses the key issues affecting African American male youth. Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy is a concept that has been widely examined in the field of education (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1995) is one of the first educational theorists to have adopted the term "culturally relevant teaching," noting that this requires that teachers meet three criteria: "an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (p. 483). Teaching practices that adopt this framework involve engaging students who are typically marginalized in schools by providing opportunities for them to participate in learning that is meaningful to them, drawing on the cultural capital and prior knowledge that each student brings to the classroom, and facilitating the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness in students that helps them critique social and cultural norms and systems of oppression. While this literature has been extensively developed in the field of education over the past several years, the specific concept of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy has not been explored widely in relation to out-of-school youth programs despite its relevance outside of formal schooling contexts. Within the field of youth development, the literature that does emphasize the importance of focusing on relevant and responsive developmental contexts for youth is primarily concentrated in studies of out-of-school youth organizing for social justice (Ginwright, 2004; Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Lacoe, 2006). We contend that a framework of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy should be expanded to all out-of-school programs in an effort to create more positive developmental contexts for youth, particularly for those who experience multiple and intersecting inequalities.

For this paper, we use the broad framework of culturally responsive pedagogy developed by Geneva Gay (2000) and adapted by Tambra Jackson (2011) for a program she evaluated that specifically targets African American youth and teachers. These authors suggest that culturally relevant and responsive programs for youth, and in particular African American youth, are comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, validating, transformative, and emancipatory (see Table 1). Each of these culture components may be more or less emphasized by a program depending on the particular needs of the youth it is serving, but each element represents a key facet of culturally responsive programming. While all elements

of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy may not be incorporated in one program, this framework illustrates how programs for youth may be structured in a manner that provides a comprehensive array of opportunities for marginalized youth to grow and develop. We are particularly interested in how this framework of culturally relevant and responsive youth programming has the potential to create positive developmental out-of-school contexts for African American male youth, particularly in relation to the task of identity integration. The *comprehensive* and *multidimensional* element of culturally responsive programming provides multiple contexts in which youth can interact with one another and explore their various interests and strengths, thus allowing for an exploration of various facets of their identity. An *empowering* program context where youth can acquire skills, knowledge, experience, and cultural capital that will help them navigate the structural barriers they face as they move through society, is important in helping youth develop an understanding of the steps to attaining their aspirations and how to navigate potential barriers along the way. A *validating* program curriculum in which participating youths' intersectional identities are recognized and valued is an important facet of providing a space for youth to explore their identity in relation to their own experiences and the experiences of their peers and communities. The *transformative* and *emancipatory* elements of a culturally responsive program create a space that does not reproduce social hierarchies and inequities but instead creates an environment in which youth can explore, resist, and reconstruct social norms and conceptions of identity. This is a particularly crucial component of culturally responsive youth programming in creating a positive developmental context for marginalized youth, as it affirms the unique and diverse identities of youth and encourages them to explore their role within an unequal society and how they are and can become active participants in challenging and working to reconstruct such a system. For the current study, we examine the STRIVE program in relation to Gay (2000) and Jackson's (2011) adapted framework to gauge where STRIVE excels in relation to culturally responsive and relevant programming and where there are areas for growth. Our findings are organized in relation to the culturally responsive and relevant youth program framework of comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, validating, transformative, and emancipatory programming.

Methods

Site and sample

The STRIVE Empowerment Program for African American Boys is a grant-funded faith-based organization that seeks to address the inequities and injustices facing African American male youth, with a particular emphasis on mass incarceration and how to decrease one's chances of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. STRIVE was founded in 2007 by Dean[3], an African American male in his late 20s. Dean grew up in a mid-size city in the Southern U.S. in a working class neighborhood where he attended local public schools. Dean has a Bachelor of Science degree in Speech Communication and a MBA in Business Administration.

Dean shared with us that STRIVE is the result of a vision he received from God in the middle of the night to create an organization for at-risk African American male youth. As such, both faith and social issues facing African American male youth create the foundation for this program. Specifically, STRIVE states that "we have

[3] This is a pseudonym

been commissioned to empower young black males with the knowledge of Jesus." Additionally, the program is advertised as "offer[ing] culturally relevant, evidence based alternatives to juvenile delinquency and early intervention programs," and that "through race specific training and mentoring, African American boys have a better opportunity to be strong, successful, well-rounded leaders of today and in the future if given intentional opportunity." STRIVE aims to facilitate such programming through group and one-on-one mentoring and a comprehensive range of structured activities, such as academic tutoring, community service activities, and group discussions regarding race and inequality. Monthly themes influence the nature of the activities and discussions that are facilitated for youth, covering topics such as substance abuse, violence, academic success, and family relationships. While each month focuses on a particular theme or issue, the issue of mass incarceration and the disproportionate rate of minority youth who come into contact with the juvenile justice system undergirds all discussions and activities in the program throughout the year. For example, during the monthly theme of academic success, Dean intentionally facilitated discussions regarding the school-to-prison pipeline. In one such discussion, Dean asked youth to reflect on the relationship between the rate of school suspensions and expulsions of African American male youth and the percentage of this demographic populating U.S. prisons.

The organization operates out of two sites in a mid-size Southern city in the United States. The first site houses the program for boys ages 8 to 13, and is situated within a community center in a low-income, predominantly African American neighborhood. This program occurs three times per week for three hours after school. Dean recruited youth to participate in STRIVE by going to informal pickup basketball games and organized events at the local community center and sharing information about the program. The second site is for older youth between the ages of 14 and 19 and operates out of a local high school. This program is facilitated once a week for an hour in the morning before participants start classes for the day. Program participants were recruited via teacher and administrator referrals of students who were perceived to be struggling academically or behaviorally in school.

The mission and pedagogical framework of programs for both the younger and the older boys are the same, however the curriculum for each group is tailored to the specific developmental needs and interests of the participants in each. STRIVE aims to create a program that is relevant and responsive to the needs and experiences of the African American male youth with whom they work through different activities and modes of communication. The program for younger participants focuses more heavily on developing a positive sense of self, building healthy and supportive peer relationships, increasing academic proficiency and self-efficacy, and becoming active member of their local community. The program for older youth focuses more on the development of positive future selves, particularly in relation to the workforce and one's local community and society in general. Both programs are designed to highlight inequalities affecting African American men in the U.S. and how participants' experience such inequalities. Due to the similar goals and values of the two programs, we conducted a joint analysis of the data collected from both.

Participants in our study included a mix of youth from the two programs. Overall, all participants in both STRIVE

programs agreed to participate in the study and returned consent forms, comprising a total of 16 youth. Participants were between the ages of eight and eighteen, with an overall mean age of 14 years. All participants identified as male and either African American (78%) or biracial (22%). Within the census tract in which the majority of participants live, the racial composition is 83.0% African American, 9.7% White, and 3.6% Hispanic (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). The median household income is $16,853, which is less than one fourth of the citywide median income, and 93.6% of households are renter-occupied (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Study Parameters

The authors chose to focus on the STRIVE program, as Dean was an existing community partner of the Department of Human and Organizational Development at Vanderbilt University and he had requested research assistance. Moreover, the three authors each had different disciplinary backgrounds that related to a primary component of the STRIVE program—the first author has a background in education and youth development, the second author studies faith-based organizations, and the third author's work has focused primarily on the criminalization and incarceration of African American males. The authors offered to provide research assistance to Dean and he requested an evaluation of the STRIVE program. The evaluation was carried out from 2011 to 2012. The overall aim of the evaluation was to understand how the program addresses the specific issues that have been shown to put minority youth at disproportionate risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on the pedagogical methods employed by Dean to reduce disproportionate minority contact. In particular, we sought to answer the following questions: 1) how does a youth program that provides race-specific training and mentoring to African American male youth address the specific issues that have been shown to put minority youth at disproportionate risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system?; and, 2) how does a program tailored to the needs and experiences of African American male youth align with the principles of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy?

Data Collection

Qualitative inquiry was used as a tool to explore the nature of the STRIVE program and the nuances of participating youths' experiences in STRIVE (Charmaz, 2006). Data are derived from a program evaluation of STRIVE, which included one 30–60 minute semi-structured post-program interview with each study participant in the young boys program (n=10), one hour-long post-program focus group with study participants in the high school group (n=6), two in-depth hour-long interviews with the program founder/director, Dean, and content analysis of programmatic materials and announcements regarding the program. The individual and group interviews with youth participants explored their experiences as members of STRIVE, their views on the program content and delivery of STRIVE (such as program-led discussions regarding race and racial equity), their experiences in their schools and communities prior to and during their involvement in the program, and their nature of their educational and occupational aspirations prior to and during their involvement in STRIVE. The interviews with the program director explored his life history, why and how he started the STRIVE program, his justification for the specific design and facilitation of the program, and his vision for STRIVE participants now and in the future.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

For the purposes of this paper, focused theoretical coding was used to understand participants' experiences in STRIVE in relation to the aforementioned framework of culturally relevant and responsive education outlined by Geneva Gay (2000) and adapted by Tambra Jackson (2011). This coding technique was used in order to understand how STRIVE's efforts to provide culturally relevant programming for African American male youth aligns with the theoretical framework of culturally relevant and responsive programs as comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, validating, transformative, and emancipatory. We each read and collectively discussed Gay (2000) and Jackson's (2011) articles in order to ensure that we were understanding and interpreting each facet of culturally responsive and relevant programming similarly. We each used NVivo 9 to assist with the coding process. After an initial round focused coding by each member of the research team, we discussed and compared our codes with one another to identify where our coding aligned and where it diverged. In addition to identifying points of agreement in our coding, we focused on the few points of divergence we encountered in our coding (e.g., distinguishing between the construct multidimensional and comprehensive programming as they relate to STRIVE) to understand the ways in which each of us was interpreting the data, to garner any further insights that came from those areas of discordance, and to reconcile disconnects in our coding processes (Barbour, 2001).

Findings and Discussion

Comprehensive Programming

Providing a holistic learning environment for youth in which they can grow socially, intellectually, physically, and emotionally is an important component of culturally responsive programming. STRIVE incorporates a wide range of activities in order to create a comprehensive program for participating youth. In advertising the program, STRIVE outlined the range of activities that were going to be provided throughout the year, including "tutoring, post secondary preparation, culturally relevant experiences, African American history, making and installing solar panels, meditation, maintaining our community garden, civics, sports leagues, field trips, and more." These activities provide a breadth of opportunities for youth to explore various facets of themselves and their interests, and the majority of youth we interviewed found this to be a particularly appealing element of the program that contributed to their development.

Social development was emphasized by many youth as being one of the main benefits of being in the STRIVE program. Several discussed the importance of the relationships they built with their peers in the program and some youth referred to the STRIVE community as being like a "family." For example, one young man shared that he built new relationships with peers who quickly became like family to him over the year: "I didn't really know a lot of people, then this year we got a lot closer, kinda like a family." Within these discussions of the relationships that were built among members of STRIVE, trust and mutual support emerged as an important theme for some youth. One participant remarked that he was relieved that STRIVE provided a context where he "can hang out

and have fun, and I can trust [my friends]." Others discussed how an emphasis on helping each other out, whether with homework or on the basketball court, was also important in building social relationships with their peers in STRIVE. For example, one young man shared that because of his involvement in STRIVE he learned about trying to support his peers in a positive way in different contexts: "I put like effort for it to not get, let people get in my head when we're on a [basketball] court and I keep [my friends] out of trouble." Several youth noted the role of STRIVE in helping them learn to manage emotions and engage more constructively in conflict with peers, family members, and other important people in their lives. For example, one young boy shared the following anecdote: "I used to get in trouble [before STRIVE] and then like at the, like now, I'm not getting in trouble and I'm like doing better. That when my mom's asking me to do something then I do it. And like before I like used, she used to have to say it like three times and now she only says it like once and then I get up and do it."

In addition to developing positive relationships with their peers and families, youth suggested that Dean and, to a lesser extent, his volunteer assistant are important adult figures in participants' lives and provide the young men with a variety of support. Some of the youth described the two staff as being a "male figure," "friend," or "brother." For example, one young participant shared that Dean is "not like a father, he's more like a brother, you know, he plays a lot." This element of having a fun and informal relationship with the two adult STRIVE staff was present in many participants' descriptions of their experiences in the program. For example, one young man shared that he likes having Dean as an adult figure in his life "cause we be like going to things, we like going to places and he like asks me some questions and I be like laughing and [talking] to him." Providing contexts in which youth can build a network of support among their peers and adult mentors is an important component of ensuring the healthy development of youth (Deutsch, 2008; Nissen, 2011; Reclaiming Futures Seattle-King County WA, 2010). Creating a space in which youth are valued and learn to value and respect one another is an important facet of this process. Building positive relationships that provide support and a sense of trust can provide the foundation for youth to explore themselves in relation to others, which aids in the process of identity development. This is described as relational development, which tends to be examined less frequently among males than females in developmental research despite the fact that strong, supportive relationships are just as important to the healthy development of males (Deutsch, 2008). This relational development is a particularly strong facet of the programming provided by STRIVE and is a good example of one of the ways in which this program creates a comprehensive developmental setting for youth.

Intellectual development was also a noted component of youths' experiences in STRIVE, however this was primarily discussed in relation to improved performance at school. Many of the youth in the program for younger boys discussed the academic tutoring and homework help they received as an important factor contributing to improved academic success, primarily in the form of improved grades. For example, one student shared that "my low grade in math was a 60 and Dean helped me bring it back up to a C," while another remarked "I used to get like 75's and 80's, but then now like I get like 90's and like 89's." Two participants in the older program also suggested that the STRIVE staff had contributed to their academic success by encouraging them to continue going to class

and by talking to their teachers on their behalf. For example, one student shared that "[STRIVE]'s really helping me out with my grades … 'cause Mr. Dean [talked] to my teachers… it made, it made me like open my eyes up on my school work. So we can like make goals, set goals that you trying to make, and then, and something positive."

The aforementioned opportunities for social, emotional, and intellectual development illustrate how STRIVE provides a comprehensive range of programming that meets several of the needs and interests of the youth it serves. Interviews with participating youth suggest that while a holistic range of developmentally beneficial activities are provided, a particular strength of STRIVE's programming is the social development and support experienced by youth.

Multidimensional Programming

The multidimensional component of culturally responsive programming involves the use of facilitation techniques that are reflective of youths' cultures and interests. Many youth discussed how important it is to have sports, games, and other hands-on activities in STRIVE for keeping them engaged and interested. We found that for the younger participants, sports activities, such as playing basketball or going to football games, were particularly appealing. For many of the younger participants, this aligned with their aspirations of going into the NBA or NFL in the future. For example, nearly all the young participants in the program had such hopes for the future, making comments such as "after college I wanna become a professional basketball player" or "I want to be a football or basketball [player] and go to the NFL or NBA." Thus, many were happy that STRIVE provided the space to engage in multiple sporting activities in addition to other activities, such as doing homework, gardening, or having discussions. For example, one young boy shared that "my favorite part is like when we first come in he says 'Young kings, make your AKM pledge' and then start helpin' us with our homework and after we get done we go into the gym to play basketball."

For the high school program, the emphasis placed on entrepreneurship was particularly appealing for the majority of participants. For example, in the focus group, one young man stated that he joined STRIVE because he heard entrepreneurship would be one of the foci of the program: "I wanna learn about business because I might want to start my own business one day." Another young man followed up by stating "I need to know the steps to do it [start a business]." A third participant subsequently noted that he believed he and the other participants in the high school program were particularly interested in joining because "[We're] guys who just wanna you know making a change in our self, bettering our self, starting our own business, stuff like that." This alignment of program foci with the aspirations and interests of the younger and older participants is a key component of creating a multidimensional youth program. Such alignment is important in creating a space in which youth can explore their interests and learn the information and skills that may be necessary to pursuing these interests in the future (Sharp & Coatsworth, 2012). The exploration of career goals is an important facet of identity development wherein youth can "actively work toward positive future selves" (Deutsch, 2008, p. 195).

Empowering Programming

An empowering youth setting involves creating environments where youth can acquire skills, knowledge, and cultural capital, and take on leadership roles or serve the program in some capacity. The

multidimensional aspect of STRIVE, as described above, provides a space where youth can develop skills and gain information regarding some of their interests and aspirations, such as playing sports and starting a business. In addition to this, youth in STRIVE are given helpful academic support, which may be viewed as assisting them with the acquisition of cultural capital, particularly within the realm of education. Many of the participating youth discussed the important role STRIVE mentors have played in the development of their academic skills and consistent homework habits. For example, youth remarked that they saw an increase in their grades after being in the program for several months and getting help with their homework, as noted above (see Comprehensive Programming). Although homework help was important in creating tangible academic benefits for several participants, there was no evidence that participating youth were provided with academic enrichment opportunities, which could further augment their academic competence and self-efficacy.

Another facet of an empowering culturally relevant and responsive program involves creating opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles or serve the program in some capacity. Although youth discussed helping each other or their families and communities, making statements such as "Being a [member of STRIVE means] helping other [participants] and helping them with their homework and stuff," none of the young men indicated they had the opportunity to take on leadership roles within the program. However, studies have found that many adolescents cite responsibility as a key component of their identity and value opportunities where they could be leaders (Deutsch, 2008; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, McLoughlin, 2006). For example, Deutsch (2008) found that because teenage youth at East Side Boys and Girls' Club were given the opportunity to work with younger youth, the older youth "come to see themselves as experts and contributing members of the community" and "begin to see a place for themselves in the adult world" (p. 185). While these opportunities do not exist in STRIVE, there certainly is room for such positions of leadership to occur. The youth in the high school program could, for instance, be mentors for the younger boys in the program. Such a setup could create a more empowering and positive developmental context for youth in STRIVE.

Validating Programming

One of the key goals of culturally responsive youth programming is to create a context that promotes social, cultural, and historical awareness of African American culture and the diversity of experiences of African Americans across the U.S. In advertising the program, STRIVE held a workshop to communicate the goals of the program, which involves: "creat[ing] a safe and compassionate atmosphere where boys and men can identify the common struggles associated with being a young black male in today's society. The promise is that when the boys leave, they'll have a good understanding of the internal and external issues they face in their daily lives." A few youth were initially drawn to this program for these reasons. For example, one young man stated:

> I joined STRIVE because they said it would be young people …like with African Americans, where you can … just have fun and talk about issues and you can have a mentor to talk to … [Dean] said we would learn history, and especially in learning it with my friends.

In addition to having a space where African American history and culture was considered of prime importance, the creation of a program that was specific to male youth was a draw for some participants. One young man said he joined STRIVE "because I don't have no male figure … I live in a house with nothin' but girls." Another participant remarked that he wanted to join STRIVE because it is "a program for African Americans where you can learn and grow and … you'll learn how to become a man." Providing a context specific to African American male youth may be important in creating a safe space for participating youth to unpack and explore their identities in relation to each other and their broader social contexts. For example, Deutsch (2008) found that the East Side Boys and Girls' Club in which she conducted ethnographic work was "a site in which youth experience a sense of belonging to a community of others 'like them'" (Deutsch, 2008, p. 192).

We found that although STRIVE aimed to create a program that is particularly relevant to the lived realities of African American young men, the underlying values guiding the nature of discussions and activities that highlighted the history and current context of African American communities fell short of a truly validating culturally responsive youth program. The first element of the STRIVE program that may prove particularly detrimental to creating a validating setting is the emphasis Dean places on "becoming a man." Many of the youth discussed that STRIVE was a program where they could learn "how to grow up and be a man." Dean confirmed this when he stated that "We bring these boys in and we introduce them to what it means to live as a responsible, young man in today's communities and society" and that it is essential for African American male youth to "discover the man that dwells inside of us." When we asked about the nature of activities that he provides to youth regarding this component of the program, he responded that there were "different topics, [like] how to tie a tie, or how to talk to a girl, or, you know." This language appears to privilege heterosexuality and stereotypical notions of masculinity, which may limit the space that is necessary for examining one's identity in relation to one's gender and sexuality. This could shut down the opportunity for participants to explore those facets of themselves freely in this setting, which negates the purpose of creating a fully positive developmental context for youth. Rather, the fluid and complex nature of gender and sexual identity should be acknowledged by program staff and integrated into program activities and discussions in order to create a truly validating developmental context.

Another way in which the program may detract from creating a validating context relates is the way in which the causes and consequences of social inequality are framed. Although Dean attempts to build an understanding of the challenges facing African American young men through guided discussions, his understanding of the source of these social issues seemed to place too much emphasis on individual and cultural deficiencies rather than structural issues. This is an interesting tension that became more apparent to us throughout our discussions and interviews with Dean. For example, Dean suggests that fragmented families and broken relationships contribute to some of the social issues facing African Americans:

> You know, there's kids over here in gangs, yeah, but there's a bigger issue than that. It's not gangs. It's way bigger than this gang. Or you see a person on the street who's homeless. Oh, it's not just he's homeless.

> Something has happened. That's broken relationships. If he can't stay with his family, then he must've obviously broken something. It could be anything. And that's just how I see, see things.

In addition to broken relationships, Dean suggests that African American men do not respect themselves in the way they should: "I'm beyond tired of seeing countless black men deny our innate right to self-respect. In my opinion, this blatant behavior influences our black male youth to continue the perpetual disregard for self image and dignity." The language of "broken relationships" and "perpetual disregard for self image and dignity" as contributors to the social issues affecting African American men uses more of a pathological lens in understanding the root causes of inequity. This may prove to be disempowering and could potentially invalidate youths' experiences in trying to navigate, succeed within, and/or resist the unjust system they face. As we will illustrate in the next section of our findings regarding the transformative and emancipatory nature of culturally relevant and responsive youth programming in relation to STRIVE, many youth were left with the message that they must "beat the odds and challenge the statistics" by "working hard" and "keeping out of trouble."

Transformative and Emancipatory Programming

The transformative and emancipatory elements of culturally relevant and responsive youth programming are two intertwined facets of this framework that are particularly important to creating a positive developmental context for youth. This involves creating a space that challenges dominant oppressive norms and facilitates the development of critical thinking skills and sociopolitical consciousness. Creating a space wherein youth can explore their identities in relation to broader structural constraints and social constructions of gender, race, and class together is an important component of developing sociopolitical consciousness. Not only is this important for gaining an awareness of how the system influences their own lives and the lives of their peers, family members, and members of different communities throughout society, but it is also important in making space for youth to resist and reconstruct the dominant narratives and social perceptions that affect their sense of identity and agency (Deutsch, 2008; Ginwright, 2004; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, McLoughlin, 2006). We find that while participants in STRIVE reflected on the unjust nature of society, many participants have been influenced by Dean's emphasis on "keeping out of trouble" and "working hard." This discourse, while important in creating a sense of agency among youth, may also obscure the depth of the issues facing African American young men and limit the truly transformative and emancipatory potential of such a setting. First we explore Dean's understanding of how to address social inequities and then we examine how participants' make sense of these inequities.

Dean does take the opportunity to discuss the very real challenges facing African American men during discussions he facilitates with program participants. However, he also believes that through positive role modeling and providing positive experiences for the youth with whom he works, he can help them avoid the consequences of living within such an inequitable and unjust system:

> A lot of African American students, boys or girls, they get treated

> differently from the same types of crimes or same acts of unruly behavior, but they'll get treated more harsh than the other students that are committing the same things. That's one thing that we're actually trying to do – we feel like if we can keep these boys out of the juvenile court system period, they won't be subjected to what is known as institutionalized racism.

Although Dean acknowledges the unjust nature of the system, he also believes that young African American men can lead lives that are not affected by institutionalized racism. However, this tension within Dean's comment suggests that he is looking for ways to understand how his program can create a setting that helps African American men "beat the odds and challenge the statistics," which is certainly difficult to envision. In our conversations with Dean, he suggests that finding hope is one way to overcoming such social barriers.

> I'm not ashamed to implore young black males to point the finger at a system that even they, as adolescents, can see is rigged to aid them towards an inevitable demise. Research, and our own eyes show us that prisons are filled with Black boys with behavior issues, turned into Black men with issues of recidivism. To me the question is 'Where do those issues come from?' … I realized that what I had inside of me was the hope that young Black males needed.

This sense of hope is certainly important in creating a space in which young men can feel a sense of agency within an inherently unjust system. However, hope is only one of many important facets of coping with structural inequities. The other strategy that Dean suggested is important for African American male youth to adopt is the motivation to work hard. This is exemplified in the pledge that STRIVE participants must recite at the beginning of each program session, which is: "As I continue to grow up, I'll always do my best. I'll make good grades in school and be on my best behavior. I know my future's important." This, again, places the onus of succeeding within an unjust system primarily on individual youth. Although it is important for youth to feel a sense of agency, there also must be a more explicit focus in the discussions Dean facilitates on social inequities as structurally embedded in order for youth to gain a better idea of how to effectively navigate and resist such systems.

The theme of hard work and positive behavior as a way to overcome social inequities permeated the narratives of the youth we interviewed. For example, one participant shared that:

> I learned how to grow up and be a man … Dean told me I need to be real serious… And then he told me my behavior, that's what I always had issues with, so he told me how to act more civilized when I'm in public … he told me one time that I need to look presentable, 'cause nobody ain't going to, if I ask for a job, nobody's going to hire me with an attitude like I had.

Another participant similarly remarked, "Dean said perception's everything. At first I didn't know what that was and then he said, the way people view you is really important to your success in life and things like that. So I just try to be nice as I can." This sentiment was reflected in other comments made by youth, such as:

> Dean taught us how to do, he taught us how to grow up and like … us as African Americans doesn't get a lot of privileges. Like there's still people who are like that, that don't give us a chance so we need to learn how to really make ourselves presentable … He really told me how to have a good attitude and how to make sure I keep my school grades up.

This youth emphasized being "presentable," having a "good attitude," and keeping "school grades up" as a way to secure a brighter future as an African American. This theme of "doing well" and "working hard" was also discussed by some participants as way to defy societal stereotypes of African American male criminality and statistics regarding the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, one student shared:

> Dean said they're judging on how the 3rd graders of how many's failed, there might be impacting on how many prisons are built … I don't think that's good cause you're really stereotyping, and I would like for the 3rd graders to do really well just to prove the warden and the government state wrong, because that's good not to stereotype people.

The other young man that mentioned the school-to-prison pipeline also remarked that "I hope people would change and don't think of us like we don't want to do good for society." Evidently the two youth in the STRIVE program who reflected on these conversations in the interviews are engaging critically with these issues and thinking about the potential impact on themselves, their peers, and society, and how they want to change this.

From the above conversations and other anecdotes shared by participants, it seems that much of the emphasis is placed on encouraging these young men to defy the stereotypes and overcome these issues by adopting behaviors that are viewed as facilitating success within U.S. society as it is currently structured. While these messages are intended to promote agency among participating youth, it does not leave room for youth to think together about ways to challenge such an unequal and discriminatory system. Rather, they are left to consider this on their own, even though some of the youth evidently want to find ways to change the system and challenge societal perceptions of African American men, and could therefore benefit from guided discussions about how to challenge the system beyond "working hard" and being "presentable." This would be particularly helpful in creating a truly transformative and emancipatory environment where youth can engage more actively in discussions and activities that would facilitate a more critical engagement with these social issues and thus create a setting where the development of sociopolitical consciousness can flourish. As it stands now, STRIVE does not effectively do this, but rather seems to facilitate discussions in such a manner that promote the fitting into the current system as opposed to critiquing or challenging that system. The messages youth in STRIVE are receiving seem to perpetuate the notion of racial integration that Patricia Hill Collins' (2006) warns is a problematic solution to achieving racial justice. This framework suggests to African American young men that they should conform to a system that does not value them. She notes, "Black youth are told to 'speak proper English, pull up your pants, and take off that miniskirt'" (p. 9), which detracts from the larger issue of addressing structural inequities. Collins contends that this "one-at-a-time strategy of racial uplift" has not created significant change for most

African Americans, but rather serves to obscure, justify, and maintain the inherently racist structures of society. This integrationist paradigm currently guides the nature of programming at STRIVE, but should be reconsidered in order to create a more transformative and validating developmental context for youth. Simply promoting integration into an unjust system may not be helpful in creating a sense of agency among marginalized youth, and thus the facilitation of discussions and activities that allow for the young men in STRIVE to critically explore their experiences, identities, and aspirations in relation to each other and society are necessary. Moreover, space must be provided for youth to resist and reconstruct negative portrayals of African American young men without emphasizing integration as a way to defy such stereotypes (Deutsch, 2008).

Implications

In this article we sought to understand how a youth program that explicitly aims to provide race-specific training and mentoring to African American male youth addresses issues associated with disproportionate minority contact and aligns with the principles of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. We can see that STRIVE, while it attempts to create a program that is relevant and responsive to the unique needs of African American young men, falls short of this goal in several ways. While the breadth of activities provided by STRIVE contribute to the creation of comprehensive and multidimensional environment for youth, the ways in which discussions and activities are facilitated do not provide many of the opportunities necessary to create a truly responsive and relevant program. In particular, STRIVE has had difficulty creating an environment that validates the unique intersection of each participant's identity without ascribing to dominant norms, incorporating leadership opportunities for participants, and creating an environment where participants can collectively critique and challenge cultural images and institutional practices. These are essential components that are necessary for transforming STRIVE into a program that merely serves African American male youth at risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system into a program that is truly relevant and responsive to their needs, interests, and life experiences.

This case study illustrates how an evaluation utilizing a culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical framework can shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of out-of-school programs that aim to meet the needs of marginalized youth and may act as a guide to provide more positive developmental contexts. This research has important implications for practitioners and researchers in the field of youth development, as it illustrates how a framework originally designed for formal education contexts to become more relevant and responsive to the diverse needs, interests, and experiences of youth can also be applied to out-of-school programs.

Based on findings from our study of the STRIVE program, we suggest that all facets of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy must be equally addressed in order to provide a holistic positive developmental context for youth. In particular, for youth who are at risk of incarceration, holistic programs that provide an array of opportunities for youth that promote their development and that take into account both youths' immediate and broader social contexts have been found to be particularly effective at reducing the likelihood of such youth from coming into contact with the criminal justice system (Howell, 1995). While holistic programming

is essential in creating culturally relevant and responsive out-of-school contexts, we want to emphasize that a critical lens that highlights the complex relationship between social structures and individual agency is particularly important in ensuring that out-of-school programs are truly responsive to the complex array of issues marginalized youth face as they navigate their personal social worlds and broader social environments during adolescence. In particular, for programs like STRIVE that attempt to reduce the likelihood of African American male adolescents from experiencing incarceration, addressing both the assets of youth and the risk factors affecting youth in relation to the contexts in which they are immersed has been found to be effective in preventing youth from engaging in activities and behaviors that may put them at greater risk for coming into contact with the juvenile justice system (Huizinga, Loeber, Thornberry, & Cothern, 2000).

Overall, we suggest that culturally relevant and responsive youth programming is a particularly helpful way to conceptualize the creation of positive developmental contexts for marginalized youth and, in particular, for African American male youth at risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system. This framework provides a way to conceptualize how a positive developmental context may be created and how it can contribute to the key outcomes associated with positive youth development. Additionally, a framework of culturally relevant and responsive youth programming is particularly helpful for considering how programs targeting marginalized youth can help practitioners and researchers evaluate how the settings they create for youth may be affecting their developmental outcomes, particularly in relation to identity integration.

Table 1
*Dimensions of culturally relevant and responsive youth programs**

Dimension	Characteristics
Comprehensive	Facilitates the holistic development of youth physically, socially, intellectually, and emotionally in an integrated manner.
Multidimensional	Facilitation techniques of program leaders and physical environment of program are reflective of youths' cultures and interests.
Empowering	Creating supportive environments where youth can acquire skills, knowledge, and cultural capital; providing opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles or serve the program in some capacity.
Validating	Promoting social, cultural, and historical awareness, and using materials and facilitates dialogue that reflect African American culture and a diversity of experiences within African American communities.
Transformative	Developing critical thinking and academic skills (i.e. via discussions of multiple and contested narratives regarding historical and current events and contexts, etc.); facilitating opportunities for the development of sociopolitical consciousness; encouraging youth to engage in action for social change in multiple contexts (i.e. schools, neighborhoods, cities).
Emancipatory	Creating a space that challenges dominant oppressive norms and emphasizes a communal and inclusive environment.

** Adapted from Geneva Gay (2000) and Tambra Jackson (2010)*

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