



Othermothering in a Community-Led Afterschool Program

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ABSTRACT

We examine a community-led afterschool program designed by Black women for Black youth from a low-income community through the lens of othermothering. Through interviews and focus groups exploring a multi-year community–university partnership in a large northeastern city, we find that the Black women staff-centered community needs to drive programming activities, provided wraparound supports for families, and created a familial environment within the program. We argue that these practices fostered a culturally relevant afterschool program that was driven by the knowledge and practices of Black women in the community. Supporting minoritized communities to enact their own culturally relevant afterschool programs may lead to the establishment of unique programs that view communities as assets instead of sites of domination.

Keywords: Afterschool Program, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Community University Partnership, Othermothering, Theory of Change

INTRODUCTION

Afterschool programs have become cornerstones in K–12 education, providing structured extracurricular activities, enhanced learning, and safe spaces for students during the void of supervision between the end of school and the workday (Woodland, 2016). In filling this gap, afterschool programs commonly offer social development opportunities and academic support. For Black students from underserved urban environments, afterschool programs are designed to address the negative outcomes associated with inadequate schooling including reducing adolescent crime participation and teen pregnancy (e.g., Sturgill et al., 2021; Woodland, 2016). For Black and other racially minoritized students, the benefits of afterschool programs are maximized when paired with culturally relevant practices that view culture as an asset and are implemented by members of students' communities (Hunter et al., 2022; Woodland, 2016).

Afterschool programs designed and implemented by cultural outsiders—practitioners who are not part of the community where a program is situated (Waters, 2016)—do not always consider a community's needs. Cultural insiders, however, can implement culturally relevant pedagogies by demonstrating cultural competence, challenging educational inequality, and striving for academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These same principles, when applied to afterschool programs, yield positive outcomes by increasing students' cultural knowledge (Hunter et al., 2022), building leadership skills (Buschlen et al., 2018), and fostering a sense of family within a program (Lane & Id-Deen, 2020). Though often under-resourced, these culturally relevant programs are commonly of high quality and have a commitment to empowerment (Haggler, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Unlike physical and material resources, culturally relevant empowerment is an intangible resource that the dominant society cannot destroy (Haggler, 2021). This evidence suggests that developing and implementing culturally relevant afterschool programs may have additional positive effects for students within marginalized communities.

Culturally relevant pedagogy instilled by women community leaders reflects the lived experiences and needs of the community's children and families. Black women, in particular, engage in holistic approaches to education that educate and prepare Black children to live high-quality lives in a society built upon their violent marginalization and oppression (Waters, 2016). For instance, the pedagogical approach of freedom lessons establishes expectations that Black youth are fully capable (Waters, 2016), a missing element of programs led by outsiders. Program leaders create expectations of

achievement greater than the predetermined outcome set by the dominant society, a principle of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This paper explores one community-led afterschool program facilitated by Black women to address the unique needs of Black elementary school students in a low-income housing community.

Using an inductive, qualitative case-study approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), we examined the following research question: How did the staff of an afterschool program respond to the needs of students and the community through culturally relevant pedagogy? Through the theoretical framework of othermothering (Collins, 2000; James, 1993), we find that the Black women staff members fostered a culturally relevant program that centered the community's needs and offered holistic care to students and their families. The program staff operated as fictive kin to students, creating a program built on the community's desires and assets. We argue that community members understand their community best and therefore should drive afterschool programming and community development. Through our analysis, we advance a theory of change (Connolly & Seymour, 2015; Kezar et al., 2015) that illustrates how othermothering can inform programmatic efforts and uplift a predominantly Black and low-income community. This theory of change may be valuable to practitioners seeking to foster culturally relevant, holistic supports within predominantly Black communities. This study highlights the experiences of othermothers who use culturally relevant pedagogy in a community-led afterschool program and become living solutions in their community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Othermothers, a manifestation of mothering articulated in Black feminist thought, are women who assist biological mothers in sharing childcare responsibilities in formal and informal ways (Collins, 2000; James, 1993). During the era of chattel slavery in the U.S., when separating enslaved families was prevalent, othermothering became a common, necessary practice (James, 1993). Post-slavery, othermothering shifted to emphasize developing and imparting culturally empowering knowledge to the community's children (Collins, 2000). That knowledge, then and now, serves as a tool of resistance against oppression, because othermothers work to replace stereotypes perpetuated by the dominant society with positive self-definitions.

Othermothers use the language of family to describe children. The extension of family, referred to as fictive kin (Collins, 2000), has roots in the belief that every child should be sheltered, fed, clothed, and educated. Black women othermothers can extend beyond the immediate family to include

community members, functioning as fictive kin (Collins, 2000; A. L. Edwards, 2022; Stack, 1974). These community othermothers engage in political motherwork and design programs or volunteer to address local needs (A. E. Edwards, 2000; A. L. Edwards, 2022; Jackson et al., 2021). Othermothers critique systems that affect the community, working toward positive change (James, 1993). This conceptualization of othermothering as embedded in the community is a central component of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Othermothering often extends beyond the neighborhood community into the classroom. Black women educators engage in othermothering in K–12 (Jackson et al., 2021; Dixson, 2003) and higher education settings (Bernard et al., 2012; Mawhinney, 2012), especially at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs; Njoku et al., 2017). Jackson et al. (2021) described the experiences of elementary school educators who incorporate othermothering into their practice. Othermothers possess the personal histories necessary to foster keen understandings of community traditions (Jackson et al., 2021). When community traditions are integrated into pedagogies, the learning environment takes on a culturally relevant purpose, which initiates a cognitive restructuring that serves to disrupt stereotypes placed on Black students (Anderson et al., 2018). Once negative stereotypes are broken, Black students can develop positive senses of self (Collins, 2000). By addressing the psycho-emotional needs of Black students from an early age, educator othermothers help students break down limiting beliefs caused by negative labels so that they can focus on their academic development. The overlapping field of experience between othermother educators and their students produces an awareness that promotes the ongoing practice of othermothering by encouraging students to support the youth in their communities as adults. The generational tradition of othermothering fosters collective identity uplift and moral support for Black people.

Othermothering protects and guides Black youth during developmental phases of life. It is an intentional, multi-layered practice that ensures the necessary level of cultural competency and self-assuredness for Black children to become successful Black adults in a society dominated by whiteness (Collins, 2000). Existing in neighborhood and school communities, othermothering is a generational system of care that helps to elevate Black children, allowing them to reach their full potential. This case study examines how a community-led afterschool program utilized othermothering to address local needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study examines a community–university partnership centered on improving afterschool programming opportunities for students by implementing a community-led, culturally relevant model.

Residents of Evergreen (pseudonym), a public housing complex, are predominantly low-income and Black. Urban State University (USU, pseudonym) is a public historically and predominantly white institution neighboring Evergreen that enrolls over 37,000 students. There is a history of mistrust between USU and Evergreen, as residents often feel that USU’s interests are prioritized without meaningful input from community members, which has negatively impacted the lives of community members to benefit the white institution.

Evergreen’s residents founded the afterschool program in 2013 for local elementary school students because previous programs were not culturally relevant. As Evergreen’s program grew, they sought a potential partner who could facilitate their growth. USU’s invitation to partner with Evergreen was accepted because our research team explicitly viewed the community from an asset-based lens and supported the novel approaches to afterschool experiences developed by the community (Winfield et al., 2022).

To understand how the afterschool program was embedded and functioned in the local community, we adopted a qualitative case-study approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), collecting data from 2016 to 2018 after approval from USU’s institutional review board. We used a case study method because the context and program were inseparable and the study was bounded by examining one community’s afterschool program, key components of case study research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We conducted five focus groups with the program’s entire staff and three semi-structured interviews with the program director, Ms. Brown (pseudonym). All the program staff identified as Black/African American and lived in the community, and four of the seven staff members identified as Black women, including the program director, Ms. Brown. Ms. Brown, as the director and a community leader, served as a community-based boundary-spanner (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) between USU and the afterschool program and provided access to the program for the study.

In focus groups with staff and interviews with Ms. Brown, we sought participants’ perspectives on the development, implementation, and benefits of their culturally relevant afterschool program. We used these data collection methods because the staff members preferred them, allowing us to build trust (Denner et al., 2019). Focus groups allowed staff members to build off each other’s responses and discuss the complexities of the program that other

methods may not have elicited (Parker & Tritter, 2006; Powell & Single, 1996). The audio from each focus group and interview was recorded and transcribed.

After transcription, we used an inductive process of line-by-line descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013), coding instances of activities, rationale, and desired outcomes to understand the program's structure and develop a theory of change (Weiss, 1995). After meeting, we identified key elements of the program by examining commonalities among these descriptive codes. We then engaged in focused coding, coding examples into the key program elements (Saldaña, 2013). At least two authors coded each transcript during this phase to increase reliability. Finally, we shared preliminary findings with members of the partnership who were not involved in theory development as a form of member-checking (Birt et al., 2016). To triangulate our findings, we also consulted program evaluations, field notes, and news articles.

During the analysis process, we identified a theory of change that helped to organize our findings and explain how othermothering influenced the program's structure. Theories of change like the one we present seek to understand how and why a program works (Connolly & Seymour, 2015; Weiss, 1995). This understanding of a program's purpose, activities, and outcomes can inform future programs. We examined the implicit theory of change in the program (Connolly & Seymour, 2015; Kezar et al., 2015) to make it explicit for outsiders. We believe that our emphasis on the experiences of the Black women staff and a theoretical framework developed by Black feminist scholars is important, as one's background can inform one's implicit theories of change (Kezar et al., 2015). Our privileging of these experiences and perspectives of Black women advances the field's understanding of how to support low-income Black youth that other perspectives may not illuminate – especially because the knowledge of Black women is often devalued by society (Collins, 2000; Cottom, 2019).

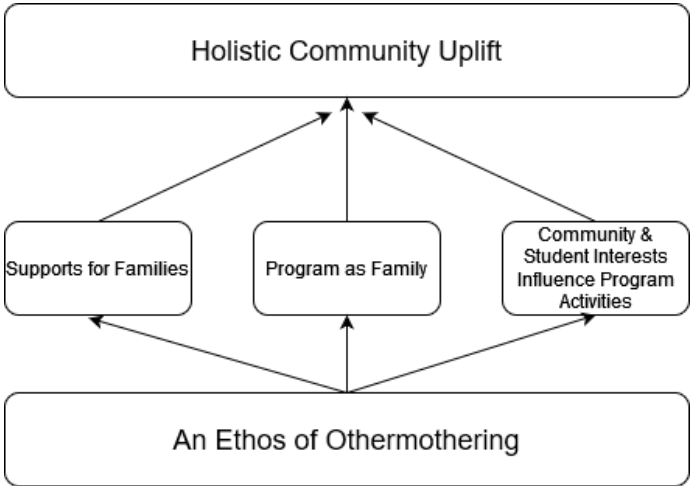
Our positionality informs our perspective and analysis, particularly as we are outsiders of the community and program (Bourke, 2014). Jake, Catherine, and Sara are white graduate students who joined after the conclusion of the grant-funded partnership to analyze data previously collected by a Black man and graduate student. In our work on this project, we explicitly looked for assets shared by the Evergreen community, intentionally resisting dominant deficit narratives about low-income, under-resourced Black communities in public housing. Dominique, a Black woman and graduate student, similarly came to this project after the grant-funded partnership. Through her participation in Black-led co-curricular programs as a child, she brought her experiential knowledge of othermothering to the

research. James, a Black man and professor at USU, was the principal investigator of the grant and was central to initiating and managing the partnership. He worked as a boundary spanner (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) during the partnership and, in the completion of the current study, served to provide additional context to the findings developed by the other authors, which increased the validity of our findings as a secondary form of member checking.

RESULTS

Evergreen’s community afterschool program was a manifestation of an ethic of care grounded in principles of othermothering. All aspects of the program prioritized full community participation and were responsive to the needs and interests of the community and students. Furthermore, program activities supported families in multiple ways while cultivating a program family (Lane & Id-Deen, 2020). These actions helped facilitate the desired goal of the program—holistic community uplift. We show our theory of change for Evergreen’s program in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Theory of change for Evergreen’s afterschool program



The community’s needs inspired the program’s structure and activities. Staff described a pragmatic approach to recognizing the needs of the community and adapting the program’s activities and structure to address these needs.

As Ms. Brown observed, this community-centered approach allowed relationships to grow organically:

When I got into it, [I was] just trying to find out what did the community need, what did they want...? When they start telling us what they need and we start producing what they needed...a lot of them start trusting us.

These close, trusting relationships enabled the program to directly address concerns within the community, for example, by talking about gun violence and safety or by collectively processing trauma after a death in the neighborhood. This devotion to giving back reflects culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

These community needs also influenced program activities. To resist violence in the community, staff developed art and video projects and invited police officers to speak to and build trust with the children. Staff also understood the challenges many local families faced and used this knowledge to develop the program to counteract common concerns. For instance, staff members understood that many students' parents worked night shifts that prevented them from supporting their children's learning outside of school; thus, the program intentionally provided students with time for homework; otherwise, "their homework wouldn't get done." The program's ability to respond to community needs was likely enhanced by the presence of community members on staff. As some staff observed, "we know what our kids need more than anybody."

Furthermore, staff remained attuned to students' needs and interests to ensure they were reaping academic, social, and emotional benefits of the afterschool program. As staff observed:

We are therapists. We are referees... [The students are] bullied, we hear so much about it, and we stop everything we're doing immediately because we know that kids will kill another child for being bullied, or sometimes take their own lives. When we hear somebody is being bullied, and if we're doing homework, it stops. We don't want them to forget through the day, that they take care and talk about that.

As this example illustrates, staff understood that the afterschool program served a function beyond academics. They strove to emphasize educational takeaways while also recognizing that "you got to let a kid be a kid" and that students would not respond identically to enrichment opportunities and academic challenges. Staff offered incentives and designed activities to encourage students to complete learning tasks. Through these various approaches, staff supported students' needs and created a culturally

relevant, caring environment that could reinforce students' self-worth and promote student success (Palmer et al., 2018).

These efforts to center the community's needs and students' interests helped drive the program's success. According to Ms. Brown, it was, in part, "what makes the program work," and was a manifestation of othermothering, as othermothers volunteer and design programs to address community needs (A. E. Edwards, 2000). By taking on some of the responsibilities for community children and by actively working to address problems in ways that would foster positive change (Collins, 2000; James, 1993), Evergreen staff helped to foster a trusting environment grounded in their holistic care for students' wellbeing (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

Supports for Families

Evergreen's program also supported families because the program staff believed that caring for the entire family was crucial to the program's success. Two common ways that the program staff served students' families were through providing resources and acting as intermediaries between schools and families.

Program staff provided resources to families to ensure students were taken care of at home. For example, the program staff streamlined support for families by providing them with food beyond the traditional afterschool program snacks. This community support became so well known that Ms. Brown noted, "Even when we walk through the streets right now the people see us and say 'Ms. Brown, I'm hungry, and my child, I can't send them to school because they're hungry.'" In such instances, the program staff provided access to their food pantry and promised ongoing support, thus performing the othermothering role of serving local needs (A. E. Edwards, 2000).

Program staff also acted as intermediaries between the child's school and home, becoming so involved in parent-teacher communications that "teachers call [the program staff] for like 30% of the kids in here. The teachers call my phone." One staff member reflected that "[teachers] call me the other parent." By acting as liaisons between home and school, program staff helped ensure that students' needs were not overlooked or forgotten.

As community members, staff understood the experiences of families and consequently provided culturally relevant supports. One staff member observed, "we learned how to believe in each other when nobody else would believe in us...when other people come to that door, we already know their pain." Staff acknowledged that this commitment to family sometimes presented challenges. For example, one staff member received phone calls

from parents at nighttime, including when they were sick. She concluded: “I need to take care of myself at one point.” This blending of personal time and professional responsibilities burdened the staff, which may have been amplified because of the program’s familial culture. Nevertheless, staff described supporting families as imperative to the program’s success and hoped to expand resources available to families.

The supports Evergreen provided to families are akin to how academic othermothers care for the whole child, not just their educational needs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant,2002). By recognizing the need for and providing holistic support, these staff members expanded the scope of the program in ways that were attuned to the safety and care of students.

Program as Family

The program staff often used language of love and family to describe their work, which they felt distinguished their program. As Ms. Brown explained: “You think it’s just a homework club, but we are everything from a mentor to a friend, to a mother, to a sister, to an aunt.” Program staff suggested that students were able to discern genuine feelings of care and love and that this was crucial to helping students flourish. One staff member commented that “it’s about getting to know the child better, also helping them develop into a better person.” This familial attitude extended to volunteers who “know they’re part of the family.”

Staff described how this commitment to program as family was central to the ethos of the program and was collectively embraced by program members in everyday practices. For example, they prioritized learning about each child and his or her name—treating the children as family to validate students’ self-worth and potential. For example, one student’s academic performance improved after he joined the program and staff began to identify and celebrate his interests: “we just got him into photography and he went down and took some beautiful football pictures...We found out something that this kid is actually good and likes doing.” Staff then displayed the student’s photography in the office. By celebrating the student’s talent, staff rejected negative social stereotypes and reinforced his self-concept, creating better opportunities for him to focus on his academic development (Collins, 2000). This example highlighted how the staff affirmed their kinship with students, suggesting that a program-as-family approach may have a lasting influence on a child’s development and achievements.

The desire to support students as family and fictive kin is a function of othermothering and is reflected in the staff’s use of family language such as aunt, sister, and mother (Collins, 2000). Additionally, focusing on students’

dreams is related to a holistic approach to programming like that taken by academic othermothers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). This deep commitment to treating program members as family may be taxing for staff members (Bernard et al., 2012; Mawhinney, 2012), but may also be a rewarding approach that helps to sustain the program and promotes positive outcomes for participants. Culturally relevant programming that situates the program as an extension of family may enable program leaders to address social inequities, build students' identities, and foster student success (Lane & Id-Deen, 2020).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The effectiveness of this afterschool program illustrates the benefit of grounding such initiatives in the knowledge and experiences of cultural insiders (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Embedded in the community and familiar with its norms and concerns, the Black women staff members were uniquely situated to offer culturally relevant afterschool programming to local children. The cultural insider status of program staff was especially beneficial to Black children, as their needs and interests are unlikely to be addressed by cultural outsiders (Waters, 2016). Program staff were uniquely situated to enact freedom lessons (Waters, 2016) because of their familiarity with outsider's deficit perspectives of the community's children. These lessons supported the youth's positive self-concepts and affirmed them as being fully capable. In addition, program staff's knowledge of community needs allowed them to understand that to best serve the children in their program, they must also extend support to the children's families. This is consistent with Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) description of Black women's ability to provide Black children with holistic education, extending beyond academic preparation. Program staff regarded the children under their care as family, often using words denoting a sense of love and care—embodying the concept of othermothering (Collins, 2000).

This study makes a noteworthy contribution by suggesting that othermothering may make afterschool programs implemented by cultural insiders more effective for Black youth. Historically, othermothering functioned to educate Black children in ways that would uplift the Black community and resist white domination (Foster, 1993; Perkins, 1989). Othermothering functioned similarly in Evergreen's afterschool program, as it aided the children's development and cultural identity affirmation while forging solidarity between the children's families and program staff. This sense of shared responsibility for the education and cultural identity of Black children has previously been found in other contexts including education

(Bernard et al., 2012; Dixson, 2003; Njoku et al., 2017). Prior research has found similar conceptualizations of family in educational youth programs (e.g., Lane & Id-Deen, 2020) but has not explicitly connected this to othermothering. This study therefore contributes to the research on afterschool programming by highlighting how othermothering benefits Black children in an afterschool educational context.

As suggested by our theory of change, this study's primary implication indicates that when a community's culture and programmatic initiatives are aligned and grounded in the expertise of cultural insiders, the benefits can extend beyond the program participants to the whole community. Such programming may empower youth in culturally relevant ways that the dominant society cannot destroy (Haggler, 2021). Furthermore, tapping into community knowledge, relationships, and resources, may enhance programs like Evergreen's at little to no additional cost. Nevertheless, it is important for boundary spanners and external partners to ensure that undue burden—financial or otherwise—is not placed upon the community-based program leaders.

Additionally, our findings offer insight into how a deep understanding of a community's culture can inform support and change, but also offer a reminder that culturally grounded approaches must authentically align with a community's unique identity. The afterschool program at Evergreen suggests that principles of othermothering may shape or reflect how leaders and staff work within predominantly Black communities. However, implementing principles of othermothering without a meaningful grounding in local culture may engage in anti-Black and colonial logics of extraction (Dancy et al., 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Leadership by cultural insiders offers one way to ensure programmatic choices are truly rooted in a community's needs and experiences.

Because each community's culture is distinct, this study's findings are not likely replicable in other community-led programs, as the principles of othermothering were grounded in Evergreen's ethos. As such, another implication is that the knowledge and expertise of community members should be prioritized when developing and implementing afterschool programming, as this expertise is best suited to bring about positive change within the community. Afterschool programs managed by outsiders may consider hiring cultural insiders into positions of power to customize curricula. Programs may also work to articulate their own theories of change to prioritize culturally relevant approaches in service of the community (Connolly & Seymour, 2015).

The current study does have several limitations. Because the study focuses on a single case, the extent to which findings can be generalized to other afterschool programs in other contexts is limited; future research should examine benefits of other community values in other afterschool contexts as these findings about othermothering are likely not replicable in non-Black minoritized communities. Additionally, the data collected in this study only represent the experience of othermothering as it is carried out, not as it is received. Future research on the practice of othermothering in the context of afterschool programs should explore the perspectives of children and families involved with the programs to understand how they experience this practice.

CONCLUSION

As illustrated through our theory of change, this program, as a manifestation of othermothering, helped to foster a culturally relevant program that supported students holistically. The creation and growth of the program helped uplift the entire community through greater community pride and student self-worth. The women afterschool leaders supported a greater expectation of achievement when they provided their students and families with the resources and care that the dominant society did not, further solidifying their culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) by setting powerful examples and challenging controlling images of Black women (Collins, 2000). The program's foundation in othermothering supported the entire family, not just students, by building trusting relationships that facilitated increased parental involvement and a broader support network for blood relatives. The creation of this support network also helped to cultivate senses of autonomy and agency within the community, which are key factors in the socio-economic mobility for marginalized peoples (Parker-Morrison, 2018). We advance community-led youth programs like Evergreen's as tools for liberation, as outsiders cannot fully envision the true needs, desires, and capabilities of community members. By relinquishing control to community members, culturally relevant pedagogies grounded in frames like othermothering will likely flourish as they did in Evergreen.

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