

(Re)Imagining Black Youth:  
Negotiating the Social, Political, and Institutional Dimensions of Urban Community-Based  
Educational Spaces

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## ABSTRACT

### (Re)Imagining Black Youth: Negotiating the Social, Political, and Educational Dimensions of Urban Community-Based Educational Spaces

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Literature on community-based youth programs generally depicts these spaces as valuable settings that support the academic, social, and emotional development of young people (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Ginwright, 2009; McLaughlin, 2000). However, little research has explored how these organizations and youth workers “frame” and “imagine” the youth they serve. This study employed a critical ethnographic methodology at Educational Excellence (EE), a non-profit community-based educational program, to understand how youth workers’ understanding of social, political, and educational problems inform their framing and imagining of Black youth. Participant observation data were triangulated with semi-structured interviews with all youth workers at EE (N=20), focus groups, and document analysis of organizational literature.

Findings indicate that multiple tensions in the framing and imagining of Black youth exist among youth workers at EE, which thusly, shapes how they think, what they say and what they actually do. Additionally, findings from this study show that youth workers have to navigate their feelings regarding how society and the educational system imagines and frames Black youth as deficient “problems to be fixed,” and their own deep understanding of the multiple ways society and the educational system have failed Black youth. Further, findings also indicate how the current trend toward deficit framing is directly linked to the current neo-liberal educational market, which incentivizes community-based educational spaces to frame youth as socially, culturally, and intellectually deficient in order to successfully compete with charter schools for funding. This study also demonstrates that both an increasingly privatized educational market, as well as youth workers’ sense making about the world – causes them to unconsciously perpetuate the deficit imagining of

Black youth they strive to erase. The implication of this finding speaks to the individual and organizational struggles of many youth workers, activists, scholars, and educators engaged in social justice work.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction**

*This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society, which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.*

- James Baldwin, Excerpt from *The Fire Next Time*

November 2006: Twenty-three year-old Sean Bell and two friends were sitting in their car after leaving a club in Queens. They were approached by three out-of-uniform police officers, one of whom had his gun drawn. Startled and afraid, the three friends tried to drive away, prompting the officers to open fire. Sean and his friends were shot at 50 times. Sean was killed and his friends both sustained injuries. The officers assumed they were carrying weapons.

May 2010: Thirteen year-old, Isaiah Johnson is brutally beaten by his teacher in front of a classroom of his peers at a charter school in Texas. As the video surfaced across news and blog sites, comments from the public applauded the teacher's actions. While watching the video, I saw no evidence why the teacher felt provoked and there is no insight into Isaiah's background. Nevertheless, public comments flooded these sites blaming Isaiah for the attack. He was repeatedly called an "animal," "repeat offender," and a "hoodlum."

February 2012: Seventeen year-old, Trayvon Martin, while walking back to his residence carrying a bag of skittles and a can of iced tea, is stalked and fatally shot by a self-appointed neighborhood watchman, who claimed that Trayvon looked "suspicious."

In each of these unfortunate and devastating cases, there were particular assumptions made about these victims based on the color of their skin. While age and gender also inform analyses of

these incidents, there is no question that race was a primary factor in these cases. The assumptions made about Sean Bell and Trayvon Martin, are typical in that young Black men are often framed as “suspicious” and violent, and therefore must be carrying weapons. The public comments in response to Isaiah, reflects deep disdain and contempt for Black youth.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the language used to describe Black youth is criminalizing – “hoodlum,” “repeat offender,” “animal,” etc. It characterizes and frames young Black men as violent criminals. The occurrence of these tragic events and the public response to them provides insight into the ways in which Black youth are “framed” and “imagined” by larger society.

The framing and imagining of Black youth<sup>2</sup> not only influences public perception, but it also shapes the social services provided to assist them, as well as the local and federal policies that are designed to support and protect them. This study examines how youth workers in a community-based educational space frame and imagine Black youth. From my research with 20 youth workers at Educational Excellence,<sup>3</sup> a Harlem community-based organization, I discovered a deep tension that these workers wrestled with in both conscious and unconscious ways. I have learned that youth workers in this organization and most likely others like it, are forced to navigate their feelings about the ways in which the larger society and the educational system imagines and frames Black youth as deficient “problems to be fixed,” and their own deep understanding of the multiple ways in which society and the educational system have failed Black youth. This tension complicates the work of organizations like Educational Excellence because it places youth workers in the difficult situation of simultaneously critiquing the societal framing of Black youth

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term Black to represent youth participants of African decent. I recognize that Black encompasses numerous distinct ethnicities and cultural identities.

<sup>2</sup> Given that youth is a broad socially constructed category, for the purpose of this study, I discuss youth in middle and high school grades.

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym – The names of the organization, its departments, and study participants have all been changed to protect their identities.



and thus empathizing with the Black youth they serve in terms of the challenges they face at school and in their community while, at the same time, framing their work in a manner that is “comfortable” for funders and the larger society. In their efforts to navigate this tension, youth workers run the risk of either perpetuating the very imagining they struggle to erase or failing to get the funding they need to sustain their organization.

This reality speaks to the organizational struggles of many youth workers, social justice activists, and organizers in community-based and grassroots work. Rarely captured in research literature about youth and community-based educational spaces, this tension is critical to understanding the limited impact of critical and social justice oriented work within a highly racialized and unequal society.

### **Framing and Imagining**

In the realm of politics and media studies, “framing” is a technique used to define and examine the way rhetoric is employed to describe individuals, communities, and particular incidents. But “framing” is more than description, as it shapes the public’s perception of a situation or group of people (Lakoff, 2004; Lippmann, 1960). Scholars have shown how opinions and behavior are responses not to the world itself but to our perceptions of that world; they contend that these images in our heads actually shape our feelings and actions towards a particular subject (Glens, 1996; Iyengar, 1994; Lippmann, 1960). How we think about communities, public policies, political issues, and social problems is largely determined by the ways in which they are framed in national political discourse (Lakoff, 2004). Indeed, Black youth and the larger Black community have been framed in national political discourse in unfavorable ways for decades (HoSang, 2006).

“Youth” as a concept is a fluid social construction and is positioned as the “other” to adulthood (Soung, 2011). Adults, who designate the standards and conditions by which youth develop, shaped the construction of youth as “other” (Nunn, 2002; Soung, 2011), and thus, youth in America have often been framed as problems and burdens to society (Griffin, 2001; Males, 1996). Black youth, in particular have been framed from deficit narratives, as there is a particular meaning and connotation made by the construction of Black and Youth. Thus, considering the influence of race and the impact of racism, “Black youth” carries a weight in society that evokes an imagining of stereotypes and judgments resulting in deficit narratives. By “deficit narratives,” I am referring to the depiction of Black youth in media and national political platforms as dangerous, unintelligent, and inherently problematic. Such narratives follow them throughout all aspects of society (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ginwright & James, 2002; Males, 1999; Tyson, 2003). I contend that the larger narrative of Black youth created by deficit framing can lead to a host of effects on the public perception and imagining of Black youth. Furthermore, I make a connection between the political “framing” of Black youth and a sense of “imagining” Black youth by others in the philosophical tradition of John Dewey – “how we think” as an imaginative projection of possibilities (Greene, 2000). Imagining, therefore, is not just how we envision or think about youth, but also how we view what is possible for their lives (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2001; Greene, 2000). Thus, framing and imagining overlap and are intertwined in many ways because how we imagine others is shaped by the ways in which they are framed to us, for us and by us.

Much of the literature about the framing and imagining of Black youth in larger society has focused on how various media outlets and schools impact youth in profound ways (Delpit, 1998; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tyson, 2003). However, there has not been as much

attention paid to the framing and imagining of Black youth within community-based spaces where they live and seek out-of-school support and programs. In addition, the adults who commit themselves to teaching and mentoring youth within community-based educational spaces (CBES) such as EE – those I refer to as “youth workers” throughout this dissertation – are a completely understudied population. And yet, these youth workers can and do have such a profound impact on the young people they guide. This study, therefore, is the first to carefully explore how youth workers’ understandings of the larger social, political, and educational context that Black youth are growing up in now and in which they are being “framed” and “imagined” – what I refer to as the “deficit-oriented macro framing” – inform their own framing of these youth as participants in their organization. Furthermore, I explore how that framing on the part of youth workers shapes their imagining of Black youth in their program.

The implications of my research are critical and timely as community-based programs such as EE are increasingly being looked to as solutions for educational and social problems throughout cities around the country (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Ginwright, 2009). After hours of interviews, focus groups, observations followed by intensive analysis of my data, I have found that while the committed men and women who work in community-based educational spaces such as EE try their best to frame Black youth in the most positive way possible, the dominant “deficit-oriented macro framing” that both Black youth and their youth workers live within every day still shapes how these organizations construct and fund their programs and, thus, how youth workers ultimately individually and “collectively imagine” the communities and young people they serve.

Youth workers are central to the development of Black youth that enter community-based programs. They have a powerful impact on the experiences that youth have in community based

spaces and in their schools and communities in general. Thus, youth workers' voices deserve attention in educational scholarship. This dissertation examined how youth workers' "framing" and "imagining" of Black youth participants and the community in which the organization exists, influences the construction of the program as well as their pedagogical practices.

### **Why Study Community-Based Youth Work?**

Deficit oriented framing about Black youth within the context of community-based work positions these organizations as messianic-like entities that exist to "save" Black youth from themselves, from their parents, and from their communities. Consequently, they tend to become celebrated as spaces that can "fix" Black youth (Damon, 2004). Youth workers then are discussed as the key figures to carry out the "fixing" of Black students within these spaces. Youth workers, therefore, are central as they have the power to construct, what I call a "collective imagining" of youth in their programs.

Community-based youth work was established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is characterized by youth organizations such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Boys/Girls Scouts. Traditionally, many of these programs were targeted towards White middle and upper class students, but eventually many were established to assist marginalized youth (Erickson, 1986). Community centered programs, both formal and informal, have been central to Black civil society for decades (McKenzie, 2007; Walton, 1997). Community-based programs serving youth differ in ideology and practice, and operate during after school hours, on weekends, and/or during summer months. Research on youth studies have shown that young people who are engaged in community organizations are more likely to be involved in social activities in and out of school, and are likely to have high levels of social trust (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Ginwright, 2009; Mahoney, Larson,

Eccles & Lord, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000; Watkins, 2009; Woodland, Martin, Hill, & Worrell, 2009).

Community-based youth organizations exist in various forms, and each has its own philosophy and pedagogy for working with young people to promote positive youth development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, Hawkins, 2004; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Weis & Fine, 2000). Scholars of youth studies also suggest that these spaces facilitate the development of social capital for young people and a deeper understanding of the social context in which they live and learn (Ginwright, 2007; Kirshner, 2004; Rankin & Quane, 2002). Further, community-based spaces have been recognized for their flexibility to design curricula and opportunities to meet the complex struggles and needs of low-income urban Black youth (Baldridge, Hill, & Davis, 2011; Davis, 2006). The research also suggests that youth workers are vital to the experiences that youth have within community-based spaces. In most cases, these workers provide a wide range of services, including, but not limited to, academic tutoring, recreational activities, college preparation, social/ racial awareness, gender specific programming, leadership development, and/or community service opportunities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000). Youth workers, who carry out this work on the frontlines, play a significant role in the experiences young people have in community-based programs.

While it is widely accepted that after-school CBYOs are valuable settings that support the academic achievement, social, and emotional development for young people, little research has explored how these organizations and the workers within them frame and imagine the communities and young people they serve. At the same time, the current broader social and political context surrounding education is increasingly characterized by neoliberal agendas – privatizing education, mass production of privately run charter schools, and the promotion of

assessment driven measures (Apple, 2002). This context is also important in shaping the framing of Black youth, their needs, and the construction of community-based spaces.

Examining how youth workers' framing of Black youth involved in urban CBES is important as these spaces are becoming more recognized as viable sites for academic enhancement and social development for youth in precarious environments (Ginwright, 2009; Woodland, 2008). Given the federal recognition that privately funded comprehensive community-based programs and charter schools, such as the Harlem Children Zone (HCZ) and Youthbuild (Davis, 2006; Eccles & Gootman, 2002) have received from federal and state policy makers, there are few who would make the claim that these spaces are harmful for/or detrimental to Black youth. HCZ, in particular, has been lauded for its work in Central Harlem, through the success of two charter schools, a parenting program, and several community-based youth centers (Tough, 2004). Over the past five years, media outlets and education policy makers have discussed HCZ as a comprehensive program that is "single-handedly eliminating the cycle of poverty."<sup>4</sup> While the work HCZ has been doing can help to assist Black students navigate difficult educational and social obstacles (Tough, 2004), the rhetoric used to describe the work in national discourse is often ignored by the public, thusly reifying deficit narratives of low-income Black youth in Harlem. For instance, the language of eliminating "the cycle of poverty" in Harlem and making sure that students "get out" of their communities, creates this deficit narrative of not only the low-income residents who reside in Harlem, but the community itself. Paying attention to the framing of Black youth is crucial as it shapes the tone and dominant narrative about being Black and young in America. I do not mean to suggest that HCZ or similar programs are somehow "wrong" for Black students; however, I am calling attention to the ways in which these programs that

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<sup>4</sup> Fager, J. (2009, December 6). *60 Minutes. The Harlem Children Zone*. [Television Broadcast] Columbia Broadcasting System.

target poor Black youth are framed politically and educationally, which in turn directly relates to how low-income urban Black youth are imagined, and thus treated within educational contexts.

Understanding the urban community context is central to understanding the struggles community-based organizations face today because this particular context shapes the understanding of young people's needs living and attending schools in such settings. Framing, more importantly, shapes the way "problems" are viewed and thus, serves as a foundation for the solutions, practices and methods for working with youth. If youth workers' perception of the problem or set of problems facing Black youth is framed in a way that does not fully capture the complexity of issues they encounter within low-income urban contexts, the solutions created through the work of community-based youth programs will not be directed at the actual problems. Instead, the solutions will be focused on the youth, families, and communities as burdens to society and thus, in need of repair – which shape how youth are treated within these spaces. The political framing of these spaces as messianic-like institutions is often laden with undertones that reflect cultural pathology, where organizations and the workers within them focus on "fixing" the "problem of Black youth" (Ginwright, 2009); this imagining and framing of Black youth as problems and the source of their condition within these spaces deserves serious redefining.

In summary, as rhetoric continues to flourish and CBES garner more favorable attention, it can unconsciously perpetuate narratives about Black youth that depict them as *problems* to be *fixed* within these spaces. This creates a tension in which CBES are in a unique position to both compliment and augment young people's schooling experiences by providing them with additional skill sets and support for navigating difficult social circumstances. Yet, at the same time, they can contribute to the blaming of Black youth and communities as the source of the

problems that plague them. Black youth are often viewed as *the* problems, which ultimately shape how these programs are constructed. This dissertation shows that this framing is not a new phenomenon and has been a part of education and youth policy discourse regarding the African American community for decades. Framing Black youth as “problems to be fixed” focuses on what they are lacking and the problems they encounter, which ultimately disregards their assets, talents, and worldviews (Ginwright, 2009). More importantly, this dominant narrative and framing of Black youth as problems limits the imagining of Black youth to deficit-oriented perspectives only.

**Community-based educational spaces and the neoliberal context.** In addition to this deficit framing, political rhetoric regarding after-school community programs tends to focus almost exclusively on academic achievement with the purpose of raising test scores to close the “achievement gap” between Black and Latina/o students and their White and Asian and more affluent counterparts (Gordon and Bridglall, 2002). This narrow focus is derived from the larger political context that is characterized by extension of neoliberal economic ideologies that are widely accepted across political affiliations (Apple, 2002; Lipman, 2011). These perspectives have shaped education reform in harmful ways. While privately run charter schools increase across the nation, they are financially supported both through public funds for per pupil expenditure and also through private corporate financial sponsorship. As a result of these neoliberal shifts, the current education market is now characterized by standardization and accountability efforts that measure the achievement of students and their teachers almost exclusively via test scores (Apple, 2000; Giroux, 2004/2010; Lipman, 2011; Sleeter, 2008).

In light of neo-liberal approaches to educational policy, high stakes testing and privatization has become the norm for how educational reform is accomplished in this country (Giroux, 2010).



Federal policies, such as GEAR Up, dating back to the Clinton Administration, provided funding to secondary schools and universities to help middle and high school students prepare for college through a number of community-based projects that would increase academic achievement. As a result, many CBES must focus their efforts on increasing student performance on narrow assessment measures and closing the achievement gap. Such a narrow focus, I argue, is often reified throughout academic discourse about Black youth, as they are framed as being on the lower achieving side of the “gap.”

The narrative of an “achievement gap” is misleading as it frames the gap as a problem only with test scores and the intellectual achievement of students who are behind, namely poor, Black and Latino/a students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This “gap” is actually a lacuna in resources or an opportunity gap which result in students performing at varying levels due to a systemic neglect and an educational debt that stems from historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ultimately, this achievement gap discourse places students of color and poor students at an educational disadvantage. While eliminating the educational opportunity gap is critical, it is equally important not to dismiss the social conditions in which students live and learn (Ginwright, 2009). In dismissing the influence of the interrelated social contexts on young people’s experiences, their social, cultural, political, and economic struggles and needs are overlooked (Rankin & Quane, 2002) even as these issues gravely impact the educational experiences and outcomes for youth. While youth workers in community-based spaces are uniquely positioned to address many of these needs, some are torn between meeting the standards of test-driven policies and other critical social, cultural, and emotional needs as they spend time assisting students with test preparation during this out-of-school time. There is a dearth of academic scholarship that examines the multiple dimensions of community programs

serving Black youth in low-income contexts and the complexity of this political terrain that youth workers have to navigate.

### **Purpose of Study and Guiding Questions**

This study explores how youth workers' understanding and internalization of larger societal framing of Black youth, as well as their sense making of political and social problems surrounding education – informs their imagining of the students they serve. This dissertation also pays close attention to the pedagogical practices employed by youth workers in order to understand how the organization's framing and youth worker's imagining of Black youth and Harlem is reflected in their organizational practices.

As the obstacles within low-income environments disproportionately impacting poor Black youth are systematically ignored in policy circles today, community-based programs and youth workers specifically, are centered in the middle of this political context. Ironically, it is these youth workers who are most aware of the deeper problems that affect the lives of Black youth. As youth workers toil within these constraints, their stories and experiences deserve attention.

There were three primary questions and several embedded sub-questions guiding this study:

1. How do youth workers employed in a Harlem community based youth organization frame and imagine the Black youth participants in the program?
2. How do youth workers' sense making of the political and social conditions their organization exists within shape their imagining of Black youth in the program?
  - a. How does youth worker's imagining of Black youth shape their pedagogical practices?
3. How does a Harlem CBES, as an institution, frame and imagine Black youth participants?
  - a. How does the collective imagining of Black youth participants by youth workers shape program structure and institutional practices?

Using Bourdieu's (1985) theory of *habitus*, critical pedagogy and community education theory, I posit that youth workers' understandings and imagining of the Black youth they work

with is uniquely tied to the ways in which they understand structural and cultural forces that constrain and enable social action. This dissertation understands youth workers as individuals who are situated in a context where structural inequality and the internalization of these inequalities inform how they make sense of themselves, and also how they imagine and interact the Black youth they serve. Through critical pedagogy and community education theory, this study addresses how CBES frame Black youth and how youth worker's imagining of Black youth influences the framing, development, and execution of pedagogy in these spaces.

### **Why Community-Based Educational Spaces are Important to Study**

Considering the current political and racial climate of the United States – one that includes a Black president, and yet has an astronomical high Black unemployment rate at 18.9 percent compared to 6.1 percent for Whites (Economic Policy Institute, 2010); and where Black youth are still underachieving and attending sub par schools (Orfield, 2004; McNeal, 2010) – there is a strong need for critical discussion on these out-of-school programs for low-income urban Black youth. Community-programs, such as EE are supporting youth through this current paradoxical political and racial climate. The current dialogue about these spaces should be theorized in such a way that provides honest scholarship about these unique programs, the youth workers within these spaces, and the role they play in the political and pedagogical discourse in urban education.

Given the burden that is placed on schools to solve social problems (Darling- Hammond, 1997; Wells, 2008), CBES have become more recognized as viable resources to support youth socially and academically. However, the voices of youth workers in these community educational spaces are not being heard. This dissertation is significant and timely as it confronts and challenges the framing of Black youth in national discourse and explores how youth workers

– an often under-utilized resource in the education of youth – understand their position in the academic and social lives of Black students. Understanding how youth workers in CBES frame and imagine Black youth is essential to explore as discourse about these spaces becomes increasingly prevalent in educational policy.

This dissertation has situated youth workers within a CBES as an important unit of analysis. The youth workers I studied are integral, yet often unacknowledged resources that are central to the educational experiences and outcomes of young people. It is important that scholarship on community programs captures not only the triumphs and challenges of CBES, but also the ways youth workers imagine the youth and communities they serve. Particularly, as grave social conditions can render hopelessness among low-income urban youth, and schools are often unable to recognize or meet their multifaceted needs – understanding how youth workers in CBES make sense of their experiences with young people in these out-of-school spaces is paramount.

This study contributes to social theory as it extends theorizing on *habitus*, by suggesting that the concept of *habitus* is not only useful to understand how people make sense of themselves in relationship to their social world (Bourdieu, 1985), but also how people make sense of, imagine, and interact with others. Ultimately, this imagining can influence how others’ determine what is possible for young people. This research can further propel discourse about the relationship between framing, imagining and pedagogical practices; this relationship is situated and informed by the interconnectedness of social forces within urban settings and the internalization of those forces. This work also pushes social theory to consider the relationships between social context, which includes the dynamic nature of race and social class as socially constructed categories and realities – and ultimately, how they can mold the experiences of Black youth.

Through a 13-month critical ethnographic study at Educational Excellence, I carefully examined the experiences and captured the voices of youth workers as they negotiated competing and conflicting frames about Black youth and struggle to (re)imagine them in less deficient and more humanizing ways. I capture their internal tensions and organizational contradictions as they make sense of the social and political issues that shape Black students' educational landscapes. In doing this, I convey the power of framing and imagining on the educational and social experiences of Black youth.

### **Overview of Dissertation Chapters**

Chapter 2 provides background on the historical tensions in policy driven initiatives that have provided aid to marginalized youth and disenfranchised communities. I show how federal policies have perpetuated deficit-oriented narratives about low-income urban Black youth and their communities, which serves as a foundation for current discourse and framing of Black youth and support services in low-income urban communities. Chapter 2 also underlines the theoretical framework that guided this study. I embark on a theoretical discussion that addresses the complex and dynamic nature of race, structural inequality, agency, and the internalization of inequality within urban contexts. I use Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to make sense of how youth workers' understanding of themselves, structural inequality, and pedagogy shapes their imagining of Black youth. In addition to this discussion, I examine how critical pedagogy and theories of community education informs how youth workers' imagining and framing influences their pedagogical practices and interaction with youth.

Chapter 3 explores the relevant literature on the historical role of community-based organizations within Black communities, and more specifically how they have shaped the academic experiences, capacity for resistance, and personal development for Black youth in urban

environments. I also review the relevant empirical and theoretical scholarship examining community-based work with Black youth, with a focus on relationship building between youth and youth workers. The relationship building between students and youth workers in community-based spaces is a defining theme across educational scholarship on young people and community-based programs.

In Chapter 4, I review the methodological approach for this project – a critical ethnographic design. I explain why a qualitative ethnographic methodology was essential for this study as it aided me in capturing the richness of youth worker’s insights at Educational Excellence. In this chapter I also provide contextual background and history for the Educational Excellence program, introduce the participants in this study, and provide a detailed account of the methods and strategies used for data collection.

In Chapters 5-7, I present the major findings from the study. At the beginning of Chapter Five, I frame these findings chapters by addressing the deep and powerful critique youth workers held about the framing, imagining, and treatment of Black youth in schools and society. I explore the tensions and contradictions inherent within these youth workers who must simultaneously live within a society that perpetuates the very views of Black youth they struggle to overcome. This tension is shockingly apparent in this chapter as youth workers passionately critique how schools have failed so many Black youth because they are defined narrowly by standardized tests and the difficulty of the social and political structures they must overcome is discredited. Yet, in this chapter I explain how EE’s recruitment and admissions processes contradict their critique as many of their expectations and standards for students are parallel to the school system’s standards.

In Chapter 6, I address how youth workers, through the programming they develop for EE participants, simultaneously create a counter narrative and engage in some of the same imagining and construction of lower expectations as schools and other social institutions do. This chapter also explains how the organization's acts of resistance against deficit narratives and low expectations come across in their curriculum development and pedagogical practices with youth. This chapter also addresses how youth workers' high expectations for both academic rigor and social and cultural behaviors perpetuate narratives of deficiency.

Chapter 7 explores how youth workers negotiate the framing of Black youth while competing with charter schools and other community-based programs for funding. This chapter also captures how youth workers are affected by neoliberal education reforms, which incentivizes programs that imagine Black youth as culturally, academically, and socially deficient. Further, this chapter shows how youth workers navigate funding challenges as the non-profit education funding world rests on circulating deficient narratives of both Black youth and Black leaders of these programs.

In Chapter 8, I argue that deficit paradigms should no longer be applied to Black youth or any other marginalized group within supplemental community-based educational programs. I suggest that the true deficit is within social institutions that have systematically neglected low-income Black youth. And, that the deficit lies within the education system as schools lack basic resources, culturally relevant curricula, and ultimately imagines youth in limiting and narrow ways. This chapter offers implications for all educators, schools, policy, and community-based organizations. The future direction of my research is also discussed in this chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Background of Community-Based Youth Work and Theoretical Considerations**

This chapter provides a brief background of the political climate in which many government-sponsored community programs were created to combat poverty and provide services to marginalized youth and families. In doing this, my hope is to show how the framing and discourse regarding community-based supplemental services were often entrenched in a discourse of race and social class that ultimately influenced the conversation about low-income communities of color – and everything that emerged from them. Discourse about poor communities of color was essentially rooted in a theoretical debate over the role of systemic and structural inequality versus culture to explain the conditions facing urban youth and communities within poverty-stricken contexts. This theoretical debate shapes political explanations of “the problem” or sets of problems impacting impoverished urban contexts –perpetuating false or one-sided and limited views of the problems ultimately makes the solutions to these problems flawed.

This chapter also provides a review of the theoretical arguments that underpin this study, including a discussion of the structural problems within low-income urban contexts that create arduous educational and social experiences for young people. Using Bourdieu’s (1987) theory of *habitus*, I explore how youth workers’ understanding of external realities informs their disposition towards the Black youth they work with and an understanding of the struggles they face. Structural inequality and stratification in society creates constraints that directly influence the educational outcomes and social experiences of young people. Despite the constraints that structural forces engender, my research explored the ways in which community educators and scholars of youth studies consider the agency of Black communities and youth themselves (Dance, 2002; Ginwright, 2007). This study, therefore, is also grounded in critical pedagogy to



explain how individuals and communities are active in innovative ways to counter hegemonic practices and various forms of educational inequality through an array of pedagogical practices (Apple, 1993; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985/1993; Greene, 1986). However, this study also explored how youth workers in some instances, are able to disrupt hegemonic practices, and also the ways they are reinforced within their organization.

Critical notions of racial theory and community education theory also shape this study in a few key ways. First, as race and racism are salient forces in the lives of people of color in this country (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005), the plight of Black youth in educational and social contexts warrants theoretical attention to capture methods for best practices, in addition to shaping the discourse about what it means to be Black and young in America. Codes for race historically and currently are often embedded within educational and social policies targeting youth (Giroux, 2003; Males, 1999), which has exacerbated deficit framing about what it means to be a low-income urban Black youth. Secondly, despite the growing dominance of post racial rhetoric in national discourse, race and racism are indeed still pervasive forces that shape the experiences of all Americans whether acknowledged or not (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2008; Teasley & Ikard, 2010). Lastly, race is a structural and ideological force that is embedded within every American institution, and thus affects the educational experiences of youth of color in harmful ways (Bonilla-Silva, 1996). As I discuss next, ideologies about race and social class have shaped the type of social services established to assist those who are the most marginalized in this country. Given this historical macro political context and framing of community-based support programs for low income youth of color, I consider how youth workers – the directors, educators, mentors, and counselors in these programs might be influenced by – or be in conflict with this macro framing and narrative of poor Black youth in urban contexts.

## **The Blame Frame: Race, Class, Culture, and Educational Policy**

The framing of federal and local education and social policies has always played a role in shaping the American public imagination of marginalized low-income communities of color. From policies stemming from the New Deal and the Great Society to the War on Poverty to the War on Drugs – the construction and impact of federal social and educational policies informs the public’s perception of the communities targeted (Lakoff, 1994; Lemann, 1992; Males, 1999). I hold that specific conceptions of Black families and Black youth directly influenced the policies and social services established to assist them. Specifically, such policies are grounded in a particular framing about what it means to be poor and Black in urban cities (Lemann, 1992). The framing and ideological discourse that shapes the services provided to urban youth of color – and the Black community at large – is important to examine as this socio-historical context shapes the understanding of the current context and framing of Black youth receiving social services today. This historical framing of poor youth and communities of color indeed live on today and in light of the current discourse focused on solutions aimed at assisting Black youth to navigate their academic and social worlds, this discussion is significant, as there may be parallels from the past that mirror the current rhetoric about who Black youth are as learners and contributors to society.

**The self-help frame.** In order to understand the current political landscape surrounding community-based programs for Black youth – we must turn our attention to the broader historical context in which all policy is shaped. This broader historical context is characterized by the salient relationship between race and class. Kantor and Lowe (1995) contend that race and class shaped the trajectory of social and educational policy during the New Deal era and all following policy development. Interestingly, there is often confusion regarding the role

education played during the New Deal and the Great Society eras. Some scholars have suggested that the shift in social policy towards education as “the answer” – was a result of President Johnson’s personal belief in the power of education to combat social problems (Kantor & Lowe, 2002). In earlier work, Kantor and Lowe (1995) explain how Great Society and New Deal policies were enacted to alleviate social problems, but not exclusively education:

Not only did it create Medicare and Medicaid, it also devoted some resources to food stamps, job training, and public service employment. Yet in contrast to the New Deal, which had emphasized public job creation and had taken some initial steps to build a floor under incomes, the Great Society ruled out direct intervention in the labor market, large-scale public job creation, and income redistribution. Instead, it favored the provision of services – especially education and job training – that were designed to improve opportunities for those on the margins by enabling them to help themselves (pg. 8).

As shown above, education and job training became an important component of the federal platform to combat poverty. The framing, however, is particularly intriguing; specifically, the idea that these policies were designed to improve opportunities to those who are on the margins or underprivileged, by enabling people to “help themselves.” This is precisely the kind of framing in need of exploration – especially today as similar frameworks are employed to address the educational underachievement of Black youth residing in low-income urban contexts. The idea of self-help in this context, can be a loaded term that places fault on individuals for their social and economic conditions, which often emerge due to government neglect and is void of a conversation about social context (Giroux, 2003).

Ultimately, Kantor and Lowe (1995) suggest that education became a primary concern of social policy in the 1960s because of the interconnectedness and relationship between race, class, and the political state of the 1930s and 1940s that shaped the political context for various policies during the Great Society Era. Kantor and Lowe provide a great historical context for social and

educational policies aimed at poor communities of color; however, they knowingly fail to acknowledge a more complete account of the climate surrounding the development of these policies. A more complete account of American social and education policies would address more fully the imagining and discourse around this time period that suggested a wide range of explanations about who is poor and why they remain poor.

**Culture of poverty frame.** One of the most pervasive and damaging frameworks about who is poor and why they remain poor is the culture of poverty concept (Lewis, 1968). The culture of poverty argument is described as an adaptation and reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a stratified and capitalistic society (Lewis, 1968). Lewis (1986) held that a culture of poverty perpetuates itself from generation to generation, as the children of poor parents absorb values that make them unable to take full advantage of opportunities during their life course. Despite Lewis' acknowledgement of the ways in which structural constraints impact cultural responses, conservative thinkers continued to frame the relationship between family traditions, cultural traditions, and individual character as the problem (Moynihan, 1965). Consequently, national political discourse frames impoverished communities of color as welfare-dependents who lack a positive work ethic and have no sense of self-reliance (Gilens, 2003). The presence of the Moynihan Report (1965) also fueled cultural deficiency models about low income Black families and communities which resulted in extensive political and educational consequences. The values and messages that stem from this conception is long standing within social, political, cultural, and economic discourse about poor people of color in this country. As a result, the imagining of poor Black youth became narrow and limited.

Wilson (1987), in his discussion of the "ghetto underclass," holds that conservative framing of the poor gained significant popularity during the 1980s due to the Left's failure to

address the behavior of the poor for fear of being framed as racists. Therefore, liberals maintained that structural constraints, systemic racism, and stratification within American society contributed to/and reinforced the precarious conditions within urban centers. Wilson (1987) holds that due to the failure of liberals to acknowledge the behavior that resulted from these conditions, conservative discourse attracted media attention and their beliefs became prevalent. Interestingly, this tension between structural and cultural factors is still widely contested today throughout academic discourse regarding poor communities of color – specifically the Black urban poor.

The ‘culture of poverty’ rhetoric was discussed as a form of Black pathology, thus furthering negative perceptions of Black poor communities; this had an acute attack on poor youth of color:

The narrative mobilized by conservative opinion leaders to arrest the growth of the welfare state and the leveling of economic and civic hierarchies – the breakdown of the family, the primacy of individual responsibility over government intervention, the intergenerational “culture of poverty” – almost required an antagonistic stance toward youth raised outside of the sanctity of white middle and upper class life (HoSang, 2006, pg. 6).

I argue that these conceptions of Black families and Black youth directly influenced the policies and social services established to assist them. Welfare reform, for example, is a critical moment in history that fueled deficit rhetoric about poor people and Black communities that ultimately shaped the public’s perception and imagining of low-income Black communities (Gilens, 1999; Lemann, 1991; Zinn, 1989; Zucchini, 1997). Americans’ reaction to welfare policies is often mixed; the debate has been highly contentious for decades and remains politically contentious today. Gilens’ (2001) suggests that attitudes about welfare are connected to beliefs about Black people based on racial stereotypes. He further suggests that the media reinforced racial

stereotypes about Black Americans and poor people in America, thus shaping the face of welfare. Gilens contends, “race opposition to welfare stems from the specific perception that as a group, African Americans are not committed to the work ethic” (p. 3). Framing can be acutely damaging, such that the image of poor Black mothers is often implanted in the imagination of Americans when thinking about welfare in this country. The idea of the “Welfare Queen” was detrimental framing to the public discourse and perception of low-income Black women (Zucchini, 1997), resulting in consequences that are very much still pervasive today. Ultimately, racial attitudes and stereotypes have proven to be an obstacle to support for social programs, including antipoverty, employment, and educational programs for marginalized groups (Gilens, 2003). In the next section, using Kantor and Lowe (1995), I discuss how racial attitudes often manifest into subtle racist codes that are embedded in the construction of youth and educational policy, due to the ways in which racial stereotypes inform and/or help to understand and define the framing of communities. I also show how youth workers and organizers of community-based programs are positioned within this macro political context which can shape not only how they construct their programs, but their methods for working with youth.

***Racial codes, policy, and youth.*** As Kantor and Lowe (1995) posit, race and class shaped educational policy discourse at critical moments throughout American history, including the Civil Rights Movement and significant court decisions on school desegregation efforts. It also must be noted that the language of race, presence of racism as a force behind the creation of these programs, and beliefs about race held by federally supported programs, speaks to the pervasive nature of race and racism in American society. Critical race scholars hold that race is endemic to American society and is perpetuated throughout all its institutions (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Consequently, all policy – education or otherwise – is

often rooted in particular conceptions about race. It shapes the discourse about structure, culture, and pathology within poor urban communities of color. Further, it also calls to question how Black youth are framed within policy and programs that are designed to support them. In many ways, education and social policies for young people might have changed over the years, but much of the framing about low-income communities of color has stayed the same.

Education policy scholars suggest that young people were a high priority for federal policy during the 1980s, where “prevention” and “intervention” strategies were the sole strategies for working with urban youth of color; these strategies were ultimately the “most powerful and least expensive” (Kantor & Lowe, 2002, p. 490). To explain further, many federal programs during this time period were established to provide places that would prevent youth from being destructive or intervene when youth experienced difficulty in schools and in the labor market. These preventative strategies are viewed as serious efforts to building social capital for youth, yet the framing of these preventions and interventions imply that Black youth are inherently problems that warrant control and fixing. Scholars who have discussed “prevention” or “intervention” strategies argue that these kinds of perspectives limits the capacity for youth to be viewed as agents of change and positive contributing community members (Finn & Checkoway, 1998), because the expectation is that they are problems and burdens to society (Ginwright, 2009).

Black communities and Black youth have responded to this kind of framing and narratives in a variety of ways, however, their modes of resistance have caused conflict within academic circles – whether it is participation in underground economies (Venkatesh, 2006), organizing and activism for social, political, and educational change (Ginwright, 2006/2007), exceeding educational expectations (Akom, 2003) or purposely rejecting them (Carter, 2005;

Fine, 1991; Willis, 1981). These various forms of resistance arise to counter the inequalities that shape their communities and schools. Dance (2002) rejects the premise that structural forces control Black youth; she argues rather, that structural forces do constrain them in severe ways. Dance's (2002) argument regarding control and constraint is a highly contested theoretical tension that sociologists have tried to make sense of for decades. As this research seeks to understand how youth workers frame and imagine Black youth, it also pays attention to the ways they also make sense of the context the organization exists within – as there may be a connection between how youth workers understand the actual and perceived constraints operating in urban contexts and how they imagine and frame Black youth.

### **Structural Explanations for Constraints in the Lives of Black Youth**

Theoretical discussions regarding the controlling and constraining role of structure has been a central tension in social theory (Giddens, 1979; Hays, 1994; Shilling, 1999; Sewell, 1992). Most scholars disagree on the definition of structure, the scope of its impact, and its constraining and enabling features (Sewell, 1992). Structures are defined as patterns or a system of relations that operate in ways that constrain people's thoughts and social actions (Giddens, 1979; Sewell, 1992). The tension in the field over structure largely rests on the nature of the concept and the extent to which it constrains and enables action. The reproduction of structures or the ways in which structural patterns continue to emerge, whether realized or not, reoccurs despite actors' lack of desire of reproduction (Sewell, 1992).

Giddens' (1979) account of structure, for example, suggests that there is a duality to structure that constrains and enables social action. This enabling principle applied to the theory of structure is important as it reconfigures its deterministic nature. Structuralists contend that inequality shapes the educational and social experiences of Black youth in profound ways.



Consequently, their opportunities become limited. However, scholars such as Henry Giroux (1997) have argued that both traditional and radical views of schooling have been caught in a “theoretical straitjacket” that either neglects the importance of individual agency and resistance or ignores structural barriers. Further, Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) have argued that reproduction theorists have “overemphasized the idea of dominance in their analysis and have failed to provide any major insights into how teachers, students, and other human agents come together within specific historical and social contexts in order to both make and reproduce the conditions of their existence” (p.70). Resistance theorists, on the other hand, contend that despite the social forces that make schooling unequal places for marginalized youth– parents, teachers, and youth themselves are not complacent. Instead, they argue that within schools, teachers, parents and students resist the imposition of dominant culture and ideology in a plethora of ways. A number of ethnographic studies have attempted to show that the mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction are never fixed, but that they are always met with various forms of opposition (Willis, 1981; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985). In *Education Under Siege*, Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) contend that resistance theorists have developed a theoretical framework that holds the notion of agency as central and critical. What I find compelling about Aronowitz and Giroux’s (1985) discussion of resistance theory is that it challenges the belief that dominant ideology cannot be resisted and shows the importance of human agency and action. Additionally, neglecting the role of students and teachers as agents of change within the education system is dangerous and does not adequately depict how individuals respond to oppressive social structures.

Traditionally, resistance and agency have been significant factors in the progress of the Black community through faith-based institutions and political and community-based spaces

(McKenzie, 1997). Scholarship about marginalized and disenfranchised youth who engage in various forms of resistance in response to hegemonic structures through their involvement in community based programs has grown over the last decade (Dance, 2002; Ginwright, 2007/2009; Ginwright & James, 2002; Fine & Torre, 2006; Noguera & Canella, 2006). Community-based youth programs, for example, have been vital spaces for young people to process the world around them and to learn essential resistance skills to counter negative political framing and inequality within schools and neighborhoods. Black youths' responses to structural inequality vary across time and space, and regardless of the type of act, the display itself is important, because it highlights a void in the social institutions they encounter.

**Youth response to structural inequality.** Given the structural constraints that operate within marginalized contexts, dissention has always existed over the conceptualization of youth behavior in response to these structural conditions. Urban sociologists have contributed immensely to the discourse about the social, economic, and political problems that continue to plague residents in urban centers (Anderson, 1999; Clark, 1989; Venkatesh, 2006; Wilson, 1987). Black youth in particular, are severely threatened by racism, pervasive violence, and police brutality within these urban landscapes (Noguera, 1996; Ginwright & James, 2002). Dissention over youths' response to structural constraints also exists among scholars. One school of thought points to a theory of social disintegration, which explains youth delinquency and violence as individual pathological behavior (Ayaman-Nolley & Tairam, 2000). While others contend that young people adapt to their surroundings in light of structural inequalities operating in their low-income urban communities (Anderson, 1999), other explanations suggest that structural constraints, which result in social marginalization, are indeed real barriers for people residing in urban areas. While recognizing that structural barriers are significant, these theorists

focus on the ways in which young people make meaning of/and maneuver through these barriers, and ultimately develop multiple methods of resistance (Dance, 2002; Ginwright, 2009; Stevens, 2002; Ward 2000). For example, Finn and Checkoway (1998) position youth as competent community builders and examine several programs where young people are active in their communities. They claim that when youth are marginalized in society, “they question the relevance of their relationship to the larger social, political, and economic context in which they live” (p. 72). Although structuralists are often criticized for being overly deterministic, the internalization of these structures can inform how youth workers are able to understand how beliefs about the sources of social conditions and the framing of structural issues may very well construct how youth workers and other educators “see” or imagine young people. In order to discuss this point, I use Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* to address how youth workers’ dispositions towards their social world, including inequality, culture, education, as well as Black youth may be formed by their relationship to/and their understanding of the sets of knowledge, schemas, and codes they possess from their own position and view of society.

### **Internalizing the External: Making Sense of *Habitus* & the Imagining of Black Youth**

Structural inequality, mass disenfranchisement in politics, systemic discrimination in the labor market and within education, has a profound and detrimental impact on the most vulnerable populations in society. Young people in particular, construct their identities in relationship to how they understand what is possible for their lives (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2001) Thus, their ability to see what is possible is often hidden by the deep structural barriers that constrain their lives. Young people especially, begin to internalize the inequality they face which ultimately shapes how they see themselves (Bourdieu, 1985; Young, 2004).

For example, Kenneth Clark, in his 1989 study on urban ghettos, describes the situation of Black youth in low-income urban contexts as being marked by high levels of concentrated poverty, minimal opportunities for educational and social mobility, which ultimately influence their dispositions towards education and life in general. He suggests that young people in ghetto environments are keenly aware that other youth in more privileged contexts have been better prepared for college and are able to compete for white collar and executive jobs. Clark (1989) contends that Black youth possess an understanding of the structures that impede their lives, schooling, and employment opportunities. He explains how young people are keenly aware of the discrepancies in institutional resources and accommodations granted to more affluent and White students. As a result, he explains that they are likely to normalize their experiences – inadequate educational opportunities and joblessness – as their own fault. Clark's argument captures how students in poverty stricken urban contexts view their position of inequality, and how it ultimately shapes their dispositions and worldviews. Consequently, the resources they lack form their *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1985), thus normalizing the lack of opportunities and resources that put them at a disadvantage. *Habitus* is a complex concept that emerges from ones' embodied cultural capital, made up of dispositions as a result of the subtle messages communicated by the social forces operating in one's environment (Bourdieu, 1985; Carter, 2005; Portes, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Young, 2004). Bourdieu (1980) defines *habitus* as:

...a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (p. 53).

One's *habitus* can be explained as embodied history and experience in the social world that is internalized, and therefore their responses to their social world is thought to be second

nature (Bourdieu, 1980/1986) and normalized. For example, Black youth living within poor urban contexts often receive messages of low expectations from their schools and are likely to internalize society's negative or deficit perceptions of them. Clark's (1989) belief that ghetto environments shape the dispositions of Black urban youth is indicative of the ways in which Bourdieu (1985) defines the nature of *habitus*, and the ways in which individuals and communities internalize their external realities. Working in a system of inequality shapes not only the schooling experiences of young people, but also the conditions in which they live. One's *habitus* is nested within cultural everyday practices that are shaped by larger structural forces, or as a system of structured dispositions.

I suggest that the *habitus* of youth workers, how their understanding of structural and cultural constraints that they and their students face on a daily basis in Harlem, forms their disposition towards social problems, and thus how it shapes their understanding of the problems that Black youth experience. The dispositions of youth workers is important to understand as their framing and beliefs about the problems and concerns facing Black youth in Harlem is deeply connected and intertwined with how they are making sense of their social external realities as it relates to how they think about and serve Black youth in their community program. Additionally, this concept is important, as work on *habitus* and young people has shown: they internalize the messages that are communicated to them both directly and indirectly via the adults they encounter and the society in which they live and learn (Bourdieu, 1987; Lareau, 2003). Moreover, the framing of discourse has the ability to structure a "field of meaning – to regulate what constitutes its specific "truths," common sense, and logics – matters a great deal in understanding, interpreting, and responding to social problems" (HoSang, 2006, pg. 5). Therefore, exploring how the disposition of youth workers has been effected by not only macro

level policy that frames Black youth within low-income urban contexts from deficit perspectives, but also how structural inequality has shaped the context in which they provide services to young people is critical to examine as youth worker's dispositions may influence how they frame, imagine, and ultimately serve Black students in their program.

While there has been work done on how young people make sense of their social worlds and envision and reimagine what is possible for their lives (Dimitriadis & Fine, 2001), understanding how youth workers in community-based educational spaces make sense of the social context in which their organization exist and how they understand the framing of youth and educational policy that has historically framed Black youth has not been studied enough. This research seeks to explore these issues from the perspective of youth workers.

### **Theorizing Agency Through the Work of Community-based Educational Spaces**

Although Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* has been criticized for being too deterministic, resistance and critical pedagogy scholars have argued over the years that all teachers, students, and parents are not complicit and do not idly sit by allowing forms of inequality to constantly impede their lives (Apple, 1993; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1983; Greene, 1986). Students in particular, enact agency in a variety of ways. Holding a perspective that acknowledges the structural conditions within impoverished communities, while at the same time recognizing the agency held by members of the community – particularly youth, is critical (Ginwright, 2009). The conceptions held by youth workers about the structural inequalities that shape the lives of the young people they work with is important to dissect and examine carefully. Ginwright (2007, 2009) has contended throughout much of his work that beliefs about why and how the struggles in low income urban contexts arise and impact the academic and social lives of young people are

often distorted views of the problem, thus locating the core of the problem within Black youth themselves.

Young people residing in precarious urban communities attend schools that are marked by competing forms of economic, social, cultural, and academic inequality (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 1995). While scholars have discussed the ways in which school actors, such as administrators, teachers, policy makers, and students have resisted poor education and inequality through a plethora of mechanisms (Apple, 1993), the role of youth workers within community education settings is not given adequate attention in education scholarship. CBES exist within a context that allows them greater flexibility to challenge dominant narratives about Black youth and their capacity for learning and community engagement. As Marwell (2004) highlighted in her important work on the role of community-based organizations in the lives of politically marginalized communities, federal policies that encouraged privatization were embraced during the tenure of the Reagan Administration, thus making non-profit community-based organizations the primary force behind public social services. Services provided by community-based organizations have become vital to support poor communities (Marwell, 2004). Additionally, community-based organizations targeting youth have been instrumental in helping communities and young people develop agency and engage in civic life and social change (Kirshner, 2004; Sanchez- Jankowski, 2002; Sullivan, 1997; Watkins, 2009).

Community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) within Black politically and economically disenfranchised communities historically have enacted agency in a variety of ways. Agency or various methods for resistance through scholarship on CBYOs, has been discussed as a necessary component of youth development during out-of-school time (Ginwright, 2007; Woodland, 2009). Notions of agency as they relate to community work are embedded within the

notion of community education theory. Conceptually, agency and community education theory are important for grounding this study as it posits that community-based organizations are rooted in notions of resistance and are in the position to assist young people in ways that schools cannot. Moreover, it positions youth workers and other adults within these community spaces as catalysts of social action. Next, I briefly describe how community education theory and critical pedagogy connects with my understanding of how agency in community-based educational spaces shapes this study.

**Connecting community education theory to agency and critical pedagogy.** The beginning of community education theory was rooted in a desire for collective agency against social and political inequalities with regard to education. Weaver (1972) describes community education as the process by which the educational needs of individuals and larger society are met through community-run services. This definition draws upon distinctions between the focus on the program factors and process oriented factors; school based versus community-based; and education or social problem focused. Some suggest that community education theory has been described more practically and initially lacked a theoretical definition and understanding (Weaver, 1972). Weaver's main concern is that community educators are not operating from a sound and testable theory in which to ground their applied work. Community education as a concept makes some exceptions about the context in which individuals and groups can learn within. It asserts that traditional schools are not the sole providers of education and further, that communities are and have been vital in not only meeting the educational needs of individuals, but also their social, economic, and emotional needs (Weaver, 1972).

Concepts of community education are embedded within alternative education approaches. They suggest that alternative sites of education can augment and contest traditional notions of



learning through the construction of counter-hegemonic identities and epistemologies (Mein, 2009). Scholarship on critical pedagogy challenges assumptions, practices, and outcomes that are often taken for granted in dominant culture (Gruenewald, 2003). Moreover, critical pedagogy is a byproduct of critical theory (with a foundation in Marxist and neo-Marxist critical theory), and is concerned with social context and the value of learning; it represents a transformational educational response to institutional and ideological domination and hegemony (Freire, 1970/1995; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2005; McLaren & Giroux, 1990). The sociological context of critical pedagogy attempts to work within educational institutions to critically examine oppression, power, and inequality (Burbles & Berk, 1999), and how it functions within situated spaces and in the lives of individuals and groups (Freire, 1995). In a Bourdieuan sense, critical pedagogy also questions how inequalities and opportunities or lack thereof become internalized to the point that individuals reconsider their goals and aspirations. In other words, critical pedagogy not only identifies and questions dominant cultural and ideological practices, but it also attempts to restore a sense of hope through a transformative learning experience in one's own cultural and social context (Freire, 1998). Youth workers, in a sense, can be what Freire (1998) describes as 'cultural workers,' assisting students to identify and make sense of injustices in an oppressive society. Thusly, community-based youth organizations become a critical space in which youth and adults can foster relationships that can assist young people in developing a sense of consciousness and understanding about the world in which they live – and encouragement to act upon it (Ginwright, 2007/2009; Ginwright, Noguera, Cammarota, 2006). Freire (1993) described this process as "praxis" – a marriage between critical reflection and action. Seeing as community organizations for young people are widely varied, understanding

how youth workers conceptualize and understand the world around them has deep implications for how they imagine and interact with youth.

Youth workers are instrumental to community education, but there is a scarcity of scholarship that addresses how they make sense of their work with youth. Most importantly, community education or the work of community-based spaces has been pivotal in taking on what schools cannot and exist as sites of resistance against structural forces. Black civil society organizations, for example, were often established organically for the edification of Black communities, but also in response to hostile forces that shape the life chances and outcomes for Black youth and the community at large (McKenzie, 2007; Sullivan, 1997). Many of these programs have been instrumental within Black communities, and therefore today as education is becoming more and more privatized and test-driven – through the lens of community education theory and critical pedagogy, it is clear that community-based spaces are in the position to meet the needs of young people in ways that schools are unable to due to a number of constraints. At the same time, the imagining of youth and the pedagogical practices employed by youth workers within CBES are not uniform and deserves greater scholarly exploration in regards to how youth workers frame and imagine their youth participants.

### **Summary of Chapter**

Scholarship about the conditions of urban communities and their influence on Black families and Black youth has been widespread (Akom, 2006; Anderson, 1999; Carter, 2005; Ginwright, 2004, 2007, 2009; Noguera, 1996, 2000; Wilson, 1987; Young, 2004). A sizeable portion of academic literature, however, focuses on Black youth as problems and their modes of survival for educational, economic, and political freedom are often pathologized. There is an over-abundance of literature written about Black youth that positions them as problems, pathologizes their methods of survival and resistance, and focuses on preventions to keep them

from “becoming problems” as Ginwright (2009) claims. Some community-based programs for instance, are more interested in containing Black youth and work to prevent Black youth from being menaces to society versus enhancing their gifts and talents to be productive members of society, socially conscious beings, and agents of change (Damon, 2004).

Specifically, youth and educational policy throughout the New Deal era and education policy thereafter, created various government sponsored community programs to increase employment opportunities and raise high school graduation rates among the poor and youth of color (Kantor & Lowe, 2002). The framing of many federal initiatives geared towards marginalized youth during out-of-school time, was more about preventing Black youth from becoming problems, and therefore more about their containment and control versus a concerted effort to absolve government neglect and systemic oppression and inequality on poor Black communities (Kantor & Lowe, 2002).

These themes of containment and control are rooted in a particular discourse about race and poverty as it relates to Black youth. I argue that this approach of containment and control has everything to do with the way in which Black youth are imagined and regarded in society. In this vein, the theoretical underpinnings of this study situates *habitus* as being informed by the structural and cultural forces located in the neighborhood context of the organization (Bourdieu, 1985). At the same time in order to discuss the work of community-based spaces, making sense of the way in which agency and community education theory is necessary as it situates community-based spaces as settings of resistance and youth workers as purveyors of that resistance is extremely helpful. Ultimately, the imagining and framing of Black youth and the pedagogical practices of youth workers is rooted in the structural and socio-cultural context in which they work, as well as their sense making of these contexts.

While there has been work done on how young people make sense of their social worlds and envision and reimagine what is possible for their lives (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2001), understanding how youth workers in community-based educational spaces make sense of the social context in which their organization exist and how they understand the framing of youth and educational policy that has historically framed Black youth has not been studied enough. This research explores these issues from the perspective of youth workers.

In the next chapter, I review relevant empirical studies regarding the role of community-based programming efforts to increase academic achievement, social awareness, and social action through relationship building between youth and youth workers. I also assess relevant literature that captures the theoretical tensions mentioned above and relationships between the political climate of support services for marginalized youth in the history of Black civil society work and contemporary community-based work with Black youth.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **Review of Relevant Literature**

I approach this review of literature guided by three claims. First, while there is scholarship that describes and explains the challenges and triumphs of community-based spaces as well as the impact these programs have in the lives of young people, the framing and imagining of students by the youth workers in these programs is not always explicitly explored. Drawing upon studies that show how the historical role of civil society organizations and community programs were central within the Black community, I show how the framing of Black youth in these contexts was explicit and positioned against larger societal deficit narratives. Secondly, through various studies that examine the experiences of youth and youth workers in community-based organizations, I examine how these programs have been able to provide opportunities for critical social awareness, academic motivation, and personal agency through healthy youth worker-youth relationships. Lastly, by examining the work that addresses the role of community-based spaces and young people's experiences within them, I make the case that there is a dearth of in-depth scholarship that actually explores who youth workers are in relation to how they make sense of their social worlds, and how that understanding shapes how they frame and imagine the youth in their programs. I begin this chapter by providing an historical overview of community-based organizations serving Black youth and the Black community at large.

#### **The Historic Role of Black Civil Society and Community-based Spaces Today**

Today's community-based educational spaces for youth are situated within a long history of community-based programs and political groups that have existed formally and informally within Black urban centers for decades. In fact, Black civil society has been vibrant and central to organizing for political and economic freedom, as well as providing supplemental educational

opportunities for youth through the most tumultuous times in American history (McKenzie, 2007). African Americans were denied access to formal or government-run programs for many years. In response, they consistently founded and sustained grassroots and community-based organizations that have provided social services, particularly for young people. However, these community-based organizations were not simply reactionary; they have also been proactive in their work for freedom and justice (HoSang, 2006).

Kilson (2005) refers to Black civil society as a “variety of Black people’s societal and institution-building agencies such as women’s clubs, mutual aid associations, artisan associations, clergy associations, churches, teachers associations, intellectual groups, fraternal associations among men and sororities among women, business associations, trade unions, professional associations, etc.” (p. 1). While these types of civil society agencies can be found in other segments of American society, these agencies have played a central role in the history of Black America (Kilson, 2005; Marable & Mullings, 2003; McKenzie, 2007). The Civil Rights Movement is an era that many scholars in social movement literature refer to as the pinnacle of a thriving Black civil society (Franklin, 2003). During this time churches; student groups (e.g. the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee), intellectual groups, legal advocacy groups (e.g. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP), among many other collective civil society actors, were an integral part of the role that Black civil society played in American history (McKenzie, 2007).

Addressing the role that Black Americans have played in mainstream civil society as well as Black Civil Society requires an understanding of the history and culture of the Black community (Walton, 1997). In a qualitative study on the engagement of African Americans in politics, Henry (1990) determined that Black American political life is unique and distinct from

broader American politics due to its roots in the Black church tradition, which often leads people to make decisions based on a moral vision. Similarly, McKenzie's (2007) study of Black civil society acknowledged the most common forms of Black associational life was in churches and historical advocacy groups such as the NAACP and the National Urban League.

Through the conceptual lens in which I view this study, it becomes evident that Black civil society spaces, and more specifically, the adults working in them, were conscious in their training of youth and sought to provide them with a profound understanding of the harms of racism and structural constraints, as well as the harmful consequences of the internalization of those constraints on the development of Black youth. Extraordinary and unsung figures like Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and Bayard Rustin are examples of leaders who carried out this kind of community work for the Black community without public recognition (Marable & Mullings, 2003). Moreover, formal Black civil society organizations that were known to have local chapters within neighborhoods were pivotal in prominent Black movements; however, they were also instrumental in not only encouraging youth activism, but also in providing social services to youth as the government failed to do so (HoSang, 2006). The Black Panther Party's nationwide Breakfast program is also a great example of this kind of work. Within these spaces, Black youth were provided with not only a warm meal, but also opportunities to learn positive cultural affirmations and strategies for coping with poverty, racial discrimination and social injustices (HoSang, 2006; Marable & Mullings, 2003). This program and many other community services piloted by and rooted within the Black community provided a holistic approach to developing Black youth – through investing in the *whole* child and preparing them for a racially hostile world. This point is especially salient as Black groups like the Panthers believed that the

American public education system held such contempt for Black youth and created policies that were ultimately detrimental to their learning and development.

Black community-run organizations played a central role in providing resources, services, and social support to youth and the community at large. Despite the support that organizations like the Black Panther Party provided to poor urban cities, the media and government framed such organizations as anti-white terrorists organizations (Jones, 1998). They were depicted as major threats to the United States and were deliberately dismantled by the American government through a violent surveillance operation called COINTELPRO. The purpose and philosophy of the organization was grossly misinterpreted by the government and the media, and thus framed in a negative light (Jones, 1998). Historically, Black Civil Society groups both formal and informal have provided a plethora of services for the Black community in significant ways when the government has been largely absent (McKenzie, 2007). A central focus of community-based youth work within urban cities addressed the needs of Black youth. For this reason, in the next section I highlight important historical and political themes regarding the emergence of CBES in urban contexts and their current role in the lives of Black youth. It can be said that organizers and educators within these community settings carry the same spirit and desire to protect Black youth from the harms of racism. They also assist Black youth in coping with the harshness of living in a racialized world, and help them to learn various methods of resistance.

**Political context & support for community-based youth organizations serving Black youth 1960s-1990s.** Considering the tumultuous era of political and economic struggle Black Americans endured in this country, Black civil society institutions were pivotal to community efforts for civil rights (McKenzie, 2007). Historically, Black civil society organizations like the



NAACP and the National Urban League have been forthright against deficit narratives about the Black community at large (McKenzie, 2007).

*1960s.* During the 1960s, Black youth held a strong political identity that was tightly intertwined with Black civil society organizations (Ginwright, 2006). More recent scholarship on the political identities of Black youth and their engagement in civic life has discussed the growing shift in political action among youth since the 60s (Ginwright, 2006, 2009). This shift has been described as a generational gap between older middle class Blacks who fought for civil rights issues and those who are a part of the “hip hop generation” (Ginwright, 2006; Kitwana, 2002). Organizations such as, The Nation of Islam, the Hip Hop Action Summit, and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, are examples of organizations where Black youth have been participating in various modes of political and social action. Ginwright (2006) offers two main reasons that limit the political activism of Black youth. First, he argues that there is a consistent attack on Black youth and their families, which is further exacerbated by unfair public policies. Secondly, he suggests that a politics of relevance is a site of struggle, in which there is a divide in ideology across generations within the Black community. Also during the 1960s, education policies stemming from New Deal, Great Society, and Welfare policy played a significant role in establishing opportunities for low-income youth to gain employment opportunities (Howe; Kantor & Lowe, 1995). Many of these programs were GED and employment programs that provided marginalized youth with opportunities to make money while continuing their education.

*1970s.* Aligned with Ginwright’s (2006) first claim that there is a persistent attack on Black youth and their families, discourse and literature about Black youth are often rooted in deficit framing that pathologizes their response to obstacles that confront them. Public policy, for example, further perpetuates deficit framing about Black youth and Black communities. Males

(1996), for example, discusses the ways in which policies such as the War on Drugs and the War on Crime, were key moments in history where “predator” became synonymous with Black youth, more specifically, Black and Latino young men.

*1980s.* During the early 1980s, after years of joblessness, crime, and substance abuse, the nonprofit sector increased and mentoring programs, employment programs, and after-school academic programs began to surface in poor urban contexts throughout the country including New York, Oakland, and Los Angeles (Ginwright, 2009). Scholars who study youth and CBYOs have shown that supplemental programs during out-of-school time are extremely beneficial to young people with regard to their educational outcomes and social development. They also found that such programs foster civic engagement and social action (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles & Lord, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000; Watkins, 2009; Woodland, et al. 2009). McLaughlin’s (2000) work on community-based organizations for marginalized urban and rural youth suggests that these programs serve as “safe havens” from dilapidated communities, gang violence, negative social pressures and other harmful social forces in their neighborhoods. Further, CBYOs have also been touted as spaces where young people can “stay out of trouble until their parents arrived home from work” (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 15). While it is true that community spaces provide structured time where young people can find solace in spaces of caring, the framing suggests that the problem is within youth themselves and not within the socio-structural circumstances they encounter. The framing used suggests that youth’s communities are lacking and positions them as saviors from crime infested communities.

*1990s.* The work of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development’s Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs in the mid 1990s provided national attention to the growing importance of community-based work for youth (McLaughlin & Langman, 2001).

This task force highlighted the significance of systems of networks or social capital CBYOs provided to young people. McLaughlin and Langman (2001) suggest that since the emergence of the task force, many organizations received widespread recognition and funding to support their endeavors. They note YouthBuild and Boys and Girls Clubs of America as successful examples of organizations that received federal funding to carry out their missions. McLaughlin and Langman's (2001) book, *Urban Sanctuaries*, captures the unique and vital role that community-based organizations play in the lives of communities and youth. They contend throughout their work that schools have to be "supported and complemented" (p. x) by a wide range of options within the community in order for youth to be successful. McLaughlin and Langman (2001) further argue that during the early 1990s there was an increase in support to youth programs that stray away from philosophies that solely focus on "problem prevention and deterrence" (p. x) and not asset-rich approaches. As I mentioned earlier, federal programs that initiated support to youth and young adults demonstrated through their practices that young people required "fixing" and thus, many of these programs were established to contain young people – not to enhance gifts and provide the kind of development that would be useful to their academic and social experiences (Damon, 2004).

### **Community Matters: Intentionality of Youth Workers and Community-Based Spaces**

The work of McLaughlin and Langman (2001) is important as it reinstates the notion that community matters. Community-based youth organizations (CBYOs), however, cannot meet all of the needs of young people. Nonetheless, they do provide critical support to youth in out-of-school time and create "intentional learning environments" (McLaughlin & Langman, 2001; O'Donoghue, 2006). The notion of intentional learning or intentionality is an important area that scholars on youth and community programs have developed over the past few years

(O'Donoghue, 2006). Youth programs that occur during out-of-school time have the flexibility to be intentional about the type of environment they create for students, as well as the type of curriculum they provide for students. Although youth workers are rarely mentioned directly in McLaughlin & Langman (2001) and O'Donoghue's (2006) work, they both discuss the "CBYO" as being instrumental for young people. There is a paucity of research that specifically addresses how the adults in these spaces frame and imagine the communities and young people they serve which ultimately impacts how these programs are constructed. There is no doubt that youth workers in CBYOs are in the position to create the type of environment where young people feel cared for, where they can explore and develop their social identities, navigate their schools and communities, and be in a safe space that encourages their critique of social problems (Ginwright, 2007; Fine & Torre, 2006; McLaughlin & Langman, 2001; Noguera & Canella, 2006). However, giving voice to the youth workers and directors of these programs to speak about how they imagine and envision the young people they serve through their community-based work is long overdue.

Throughout sociology of education literature, the case has been made that schools ultimately have been given the responsibility of solving social problems (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Wells, 2006). Schools, for example, have been looked to as *the* savior and are expected to provide not only education to young people, but serve as social workers, parents, therapists, among other roles (Wells, 2006). While schools are often looked to for solutions to social problems, the work of CBYOs and youth workers is often minimized. However, in the last decade or so, CBYOs have been viewed as complimentary to what schools do for students and much of the burden that was once placed on schools is being shifted towards CBYOs. McLaughlin, Irby & Langman (2001) argue that CBYOs should not be the sole entities

responsible for developing young people. Although community organizations are not able to meet all of the needs of youth, they do provide a wide range of support and intentional learning environments that complement students' experiences in school (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 2001):

‘Youth development’ does not just occur in the non-school hours and community organizations are not the only ingredient. While these hours and organization are a critical part of the mix, a range of institutions and actors- from families to schools and workplaces to faith communities- are all essential in ensuring that young people have the range of services, supports, and opportunities that they need to fully develop and fully contribute (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 2001, p. xviii).

McLaughlin, Irby and Langman (2001) note that even in their own work there may be an obvious bias towards community organizations being the “savior” for youth instead of families and schools. They also recognize that community programs often compensate for disconnects at home and in the school. Similarly, Yowell and Gordon (1996) discuss the importance of a societal commitment and investment in community-based organizations in order to assist urban youth. Ultimately, community programs should compliment students' experiences in school and also provide them with opportunities for growth and development. Reviewing the literature on this issue, it is clear that schools and CBYOs would work best for America's youth if there were collaboration. Research has also shown that CBYO create environments for youth that are warm and inviting, which is often quite opposite to their traditional schools (Ginwright, 2009; McLaughlin, 2000). In fact, many young people would much rather spend time at their CBYOs versus spending time in their schools (Baldrige, 2004; Ginwright, 2009). While this point is indeed salient, it lacks specificity to *how* and *why* CBYOs are able to create this type of environment for youth; youth workers are left out of this important conversation. Honing an understanding of who youth workers are and how they shape the spaces in which they work will

help us grasp the critical nature of CBYOs in the academic and social lives of young people. With this said, the relationships that youth workers are able to build with young people in the context of CBYOs is formative and have benefits for youth and their communities. This relationship building between youth and youth workers creates a form of social capital in these spaces; I explore this in the next section.

### **Youth-Youth Worker Relationship: Building Social Capital in Community-Based Spaces**

Arguments for youth development in CBYOs have always been at the core of educational processes to inculcate young people with values and messages that intend to make them positive contributors to the democratic process, and to ensure that they possess certain academic, social, and emotional skills in order to be productive citizens in the country (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Weis & Fine, 2000). These supplemental forms of education are often viewed as necessary for positive youth development. For example, the idea of supplemental education includes incidental learning, according to Gordon and Bridglall (2002). Incidental learning can be described as skills and knowledge that is learned unintentionally, as done through community programs, in family and peer groups – learning that takes place not only in community out-of-school spaces, but also religious institutions, families, and from peer groups (Weis & Fine, 2000). Many argue that supplementary education programs are vital in helping marginalized youth increase their academic achievement. Edmund Gordon, a long time advocate of supplementary education, argues that implementation of these programs is one of the most important strategies for improving the learning experiences of urban youth of color (Gordon, 2000). Supplementary programs are not the sole strategy that Gordon (2000) offers; he also contends that teaching and learning in schools must be improved. Similarly, in a later article, Gordon (2007) contends that research has shown that there is a clear relationship between out-of-school learning, and

community support for academic learning and academic achievement with a narrow focus on test scores. While I also hold that community-based organizations are indeed valuable places for youth to gain additional support for improving their performance in school, solely focusing on test preparation ignores the other competencies and skills that are essential for urban youth of color. Those additionally competencies and skills include socio-cultural consciousness and awareness (Ginwright, 2007; Noguera & Canella, 2006), civic engagement (Dimitriadis, 2001; Watkins, 2009), organizing for social change (Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ginwright, 2007), and culturally relevant leadership development (Baldrige, 2004). Nonetheless, increasing academic achievement is important and necessary for social mobility.

In examining literature about youth involvement in CBYOs, one of the factors that come up as a best practice of CBYOs is the adult-youth relationship in these settings (Ginwright, 2007, 2009; Woodland, 2008; Woodland, et. al., 2009). Research on the involvement of Black youth in CBYOs has shown that relationship building between youth and adults is salient, and as a result studies have found that many youth prefer to spend time in community programs and not their schools (Ginwright, 2007; Woodland, et. al., 2009). The salience of meaningful youth worker-youth relationships in CBYOs is a huge factor in supporting the academic achievement of young people through the social networks provided within community-based organizations. At the same time, there is often a high turnover in non-profit community-based work, which can be attributed to low pay and youth workers feeling overwhelmed as they are oftentimes spread thin across these sites (McLaughlin, 2000).

Studies on CBYOs and the academic achievement of students have shown that young people are likely to be more involved in their schools if they are involved in an outside organization that encourages education (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles & Lord, 2005; McLaughlin,

2000). Through interviews with young people in various community-based programs throughout the country, McLaughlin (2001) found that students often expected that they would either end up dead or in jail before they left their adolescent years. At the time of the study, participants were in their early twenties and reflected back on their experiences as middle and high school students. Findings showed that participants became motivated academically as a result of their involvement in CBYOs. Data from this study also showed that students felt supported by staff members and fellow peers to succeed in school. With a few exceptions, most of the participants interviewed were employed and active members of their communities. Largely absent from this study was an understanding on the contextual factors that make community-based youth program in one area vary from another. While this study explored the differences between programs in rural and urban settings, it failed to capture how external social forces shaped the construction and practices for these programs. Additionally, young people felt supported by staff members (youth workers) and this piece mentioned them as important elements to the success of these programs. However, the report lacks an in-depth look at whom youth workers are, how they imagined the youth they worked with, and their methods for assisting youth.

Ginwright (2009) and Akom (2006), also suggest that CBYOs are more flexible in ways that schools are not; therefore, youth workers in these spaces have greater opportunity to build meaningful connections with young people which ultimately prove to be beneficial for their academic progress. To further illustrate, a recent study by Woodland, Martin, Hill & Worrell (2009), explored the influence of CBYOs for young Black males. They found that positive peer and caring youth-adult relationships was key in attracting and retaining Black male youth in community-based programs. This finding is consistent with literature on youth in CBYOs (Larsen & Hansen, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) that focus on positive youth-adult



relationships. Earlier literature on relationship building and the Black community suggests that relationships are critically important to the collective orientation of people of African descent throughout the Diaspora (James-Myers, 1987). As another example, Ginwright (2009) describes the organization that he works with in Oakland, California, Leadership Excellence (LE). Within this program, youth workers consistently monitored students' academic progress and made sure that they had sufficient time to complete homework before participating in non-academic workshops in the program during after-school hours.

Youth workers provided assistance in helping youth navigate the college application process, employment searches, and navigate difficult circumstances within their high schools, including conflicts with administrators, teachers, and classmates (Ginwright, 2009). Ginwright's (2009) book, *Black Youth Rising*, explores the experiences of Black youth in LE. Although the book does not spend significant time examining *how* youth workers came to their work at LE, it does take a deeply personal look at the quality of relationships between youth and youth workers in the space. Further, in reading his work, it is clear that the youth workers employed and volunteering with the program embody the mission of the organization. To illustrate this point, Ginwright (2009) describes a few powerful examples of the strength of the youth worker-youth relationship. He describes the story of Mikayla, a high school student who witnessed a murder. She feared that going to the Oakland Police Department would put her life in jeopardy because of "snitching" street codes that operate within many urban contexts. Ginwright describes how youth workers embraced Mikayla with love and compassion, provided a safe space for her to share her fears, and process various options to confront her dilemma. Youth workers assisted Mikayla in filing a police report.

What is powerful about this story is that Mikayla chose to come to the program for guidance and support, not her family or the police. This speaks to the trust and safety that was built by the youth workers in the program. Later on, Ginwright (2009) explains how at one point, Mikayla stopped coming to the program – they later found out that she had dropped out of school. Nedra, a youth worker, showed up at the student’s house unannounced and spoke with the student and her mother; after expressing her disappointment, Mikayla returned to school and eventually graduated. After Mikayla’s graduation, Nedra hired her to run one of the organizations’ programs. Mikayla points to the relationship with youth workers in the program and the shared struggles with other participants as being vital to her growth. Relationships between youth and youth workers were discussed as something that sets LE apart from other after-school programs, due to the strength and intimacy of the relationships youth workers formed with students. Youth worker’s connections to their students’ parents, other family members, as well as the community itself provided a greater sense of trust among students.

Also important to the youth worker- youth relationship, yet also challenging is the transparency of the relationship. For instance, Ginwright describes that he often had stressors in his life as the director of the program that were obvious to the students during a workshop. In one instance, the students stopped the workshop to inquire about what was bothering him. Initially, he was dismissive because he felt that it would somehow change the dynamic in the “teacher/student” relationship. However, he explains that students thought it was “cool” that he “had problems too” and that made him feel more real or human to the students who saw him as a person who had life figured out. From there, because many of the stressors had to do with the financial woes of the organization, students were able to help him come up with ideas to deal with some of the organization’s problems. This particular situation not only shows how the

transparency in youth worker-youth relationships can be helpful – although it is wise to use some discretion in sharing personal information with youth – it also reflects how youth workers respect and care about youth enough to accept the care and concern they have for them. Further, imagining them in this way suggests that they too have ownership in the organization and have the ability to help solve organizational problems. Ginwright’s (2009) work is helpful as it highlights the nuances of youth – youth worker relationships; however, my work seeks to understand how youth workers come to their work, how they make sense of the political framing of Black youth in national discourse, and how that helps to frame and/or shape their imagining of Black youth participants in their program. Ginwright’s example subtly leads readers to guess how youth workers imagine Black youth through examples of their work, but it fails to dig deeper into the lives of youth workers and their sense making of Black youth.

Similarly, further research on Black youth involved in a community program developed by the Nation of Islam (NOI), shows that youth-adult relationships centered on affirming “Blackness” and Black cultural norms created a strong academic achievement ideology for Black students (Akom, 2003). Akom (2003) showed how a community youth program facilitated by the NOI, created a space during out-of-school hours that helped Black youth develop a strong academic identity. This work shows the importance of purposeful or intentional programming, which has the ability to provide necessary tools and skills that are critical to Black youth residing in poor urban contexts. Akom’s (2003) work is a great example of how organizational framing and the imagining of Black students by youth workers in a community program can change the negative narrative that often depicts Black youth as academically apathetic. Akom’s work is helpful as it shows how youth workers construct programs that can purport particular ideologies about social and academic life. More specifically, Akom’s work speaks to the salience of

relevancy in the lives of Black youth living in poor urban marginalized contexts. Additionally, the social capital that youth workers are able to provide to youth participants is important especially if it is relevant to the daily cultural, social, and educational experiences.

**Relevant and sustaining forms of social capital for Black youth.** The strength of social networks or social capital, have proven to be essential for youth development and central to Black students. Some scholars argue, however, that literature regarding social capital and young people is typically devoid of race and its importance in access to social capital (Akom, 2006). There are a few key studies that are important to highlight as they structure their analysis of social capital around the specific needs of low-income Black youth residing in urban environments. Before I address those studies, it is important to review the development of social capital in the field. The concept of social capital has been explained by scholars and operationalized by researchers in a variety of ways. From the very beginning of sociological thought, theorists such as Durkheim (1897, 1951) have considered social networks and participation in groups beneficial not only to individuals, but also for communities. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of social capital specifically draws attention to the acquisition of resources that social networks can provide, and emphasizes the importance of the quality of those networks, which can lead to greater cultural capital. He describes capital as having objectified (material based), embodied (internalized), and institutionalized forms, which is accumulated overtime and has the capacity to produce profits (Bourdieu, 1985).

Coleman and Hoffer's (1987) empirical work on social capital is perhaps one of the better-known applications of social capital to youth, families, and communities. Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982), in their work *High School Achievement*, argued that high levels of social capital within families and communities is central to the academic achievement of youth.

Coleman's work uses Catholic schools as the unit of analysis to explore the ways in which families and a cohesive Catholic community foster a trusting environment where students were less likely to drop out. Coleman, et al. (1982) contends that it was necessary for parents to be connected to community institutions where they could be supported in their efforts with their children. Coleman's work furthers the theory of social capital because of his emphasis on the role of the family and community. Traditional notions of social capital defined as networks of trust and partnerships (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Putnam, 1993) and social networks needed to acquire resources and opportunities for mobility (Bourdieu, 1985) are important contributions to the work assisting marginalized groups. They do not, however, convey the importance of race in access to social capital and are not contextualized within the particular experiences of urban Black youth in American cities (Akom, 2006).

Shawn Ginwright's (2007) ethnographic study of a CBYO in Oakland, California, addresses the issue of race and social capital. Ginwright's work goes beyond Coleman's (1982) notion of social capital and offers critical social capital, which is facilitated by CBYOs that provide Black youth with curricula and intergenerational networks that allow them to view conditions in their communities as political problems, and subsequently, helps them respond to these conditions. Given the salience of race and the significance of racial inequality in the lives of Black youth, Ginwright's (2007) notion of critical social capital is a more relevant lens in which to view the experiences of urban Black youths' involvement in CBYOs. In earlier work, Ginwright (2006) highlights the strength of networks between youth workers and youth in CBYOs through the activism of a teenage mother, who relied on her relationships with youth in her CBYO and peers to organize against the closing of her school's day care center for students who wanted to continue their education. Ginwright's (2007) work shows that positive

relationships between youth and adults in CBYOs are vital for youth through setting high expectations, providing an environment of caring, and support for their agency and activism.

*The benefit of social capital and its connection to other forms of capital.* From a Bourdieuan perspective, the strength of the social capital that CBYOs provide for Black youth can lead to access in possessing dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital. Youth workers can assist urban Black youth in accessing dominant linguistic codes, knowledge, and practices so that youth can navigate academic settings and be upwardly mobile, while at the same time having pride and reverence for their own cultural norms and practices (Carter, 2008). Carter (2008) suggests that youth workers and other community educators are responsible for encouraging youth of color to acquire dominant forms of cultural capital in order to navigate a society that caters to dominant forms of cultural capital (Carter, 2008). Yet, at the same time, recognition and validation of non-dominant cultural capital where youth of color are not criticized for their cultural codes within school settings but are valued and encouraged is also important (Yosso, 2005; Carter, 2008). Carter (2008) specifically challenges educators and youth workers who engage with Black students to help them navigate dominant cultural settings, while at the same time understanding the historical and cultural importance of retaining their own forms of cultural capital. Community-based spaces appear to have more flexibility to assist youth in negotiating between dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital. Therefore, a deeper understanding of how Black youth negotiate between these concepts in out-of-school spaces is necessary. The presence of adults to facilitate this process is also important. In addition to program structure and philosophy being important to how these programs frame and imagine the young people they work with, the relationships between youth and youth workers are salient to explore for this same purpose.

### **Learning to ‘Read the World:’ Critical Pedagogy and Agency**

As I addressed previously, Ginwright’s (2007) notion of critical social capital positions youth workers as key figures in helping Black youth understand that many of the problems they face in their schools and neighborhoods, are the result of political, structural, and social problems – and while they should not be blamed for the problems, they have the power to take action against these issues. This type of framing is meaningful as youth workers in CBYOs can treat youth “as agents capable of transforming their toxic environments, not simply developing resiliency and resistance to them” (Ginwright & James, 2002, pg. 41). Related to this kind of work is the philosophy that having individuals examine and question the world around them can be a liberating and emancipatory action (Freire, 1970). Literature in this area, has discussed the flexibility that youth workers in CBYOs have to shape and develop curriculum that encourages young people to examine the world around them (Fine & Torre, 2006; Ginwright, 2007; Noguera & Cannella, 2006). Examining one’s world is centered on Paulo Freire’s notion of “reading the world” and other critical pedagogues who contend that being critically aware and conscious about the hegemonic paradigms operating in one’s social milieu can be a form of empowerment and liberation (Freire, 1970; Greene, 1986). Youth workers’ ability to serve as a mediator or facilitator in assisting Black youth to understand the context in which they live in and are educated in, by understanding the complexity of problems that exist furthers awareness, consciousness, and eventually liberation. Freire (1970) argued that, “problem posing education, which breaks with the vertical patterns of characteristic of banking education, can fulfill its function as the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction.” Noguera (2003) concurs with Freire by arguing the significance of having urban youth of color learn to “read the world” around them. When urban youth have the opportunity to develop a social critique and a certain level of social consciousness, it often engenders agency. Noguera and

Cannella (2006) argue that Freire's definition of critical consciousness: "action + reflection = praxis" is key in forming strategic resistance and agency. These scholars argue that this type of critical consciousness among youth "allows young people to reflect and act to transform the communities in which they live" (p.335). Despite the structures working against Black youth, their forms of resistance and social change are often not highlighted. Noguera and Cannella (2006) make an important point regarding the plethora of ways that youth in urban communities are resisting the hegemonic structures operating against them:

Despite the odds against them, under the right circumstances they have the ability to critique the situations that restrict their lives, to articulate that critique in verbal, written, and artistic, form, and to move beyond critique by taking action to assert and affirm their interests as individuals and as members of families and communities (p.333).

Opportunities for Black youth to develop and share a critique of society, helps them reimagine and redefine the problems they experience in their schools and communities, not as a fault of their own but as political and structural problems (Dimitriadis, 2001; Ginwright, 2007). Youth workers are in the position to facilitate this understanding among Black youth. And, most importantly, this can be the point of departure from the blame that is often placed on youth by framing their struggles as their own shortcomings, in which they often internalize (HoSang, 2003; Kwon, 2006) and informs their dispositions and attitudes towards education – and ultimately what they deem as possible for their lives. Further, understanding the "personal and political dimensions of daily life require a critical consciousness" (Ginwright, 2009, pg. 9) – this form of resistance as both Ginwright (2009) and Ward (2000) argue, manifests within communities where adults are able to help youth understand and know what they need to about the world and how to create change within it. Thusly, civic engagement and youth activism literature are prime bodies of scholarship that shows the diversity in the type of programming in



community-based organizations, as well as the rewarding and challenging aspects of student and youth worker relationships (Kirshner, 2006).

**Civic engagement and community-based spaces.** Civic engagement literature captures the ways in which youth are involved in social change through community-based programming (Kirshner, 2006; Watkins, 2009) At the same time, scholars contend that traditional measures of civic engagement may not be appropriate for assessing the level of engagement for youth of color in poor communities (Lang, 1998; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Ginwright (2006) expresses this concern by discussing the ways that youth of color have historically been “excluded from mainstream civic activities, such as participation in student government or city wide youth councils” (p. 1). The strategies of activism and civic engagement employed by Black youth are overlooked by social scientists, according to Ginwright. Urban Black youth specifically have different needs and organize in ways that are different from youth in other contexts. Civic engagement among youth of color in urban environments constitutes involvement in activities and organizing around issues that impact their struggles in their day-to-day life, the lives of their families, and the issues that are of importance in their specific communities (Carpini, 2000; Yates & Youniss, 1999). In order to further explain how this plays out, Ginwright (2006) argues that this may include addressing police harassment in their communities and schools, encouraging their schools to provide adequate maintenance of school buildings, or free bus passes for transportation for students who may be on public assistance.

In the last decade, scholars have highlighted the ways in which youth of color are civically engaged and/or organizing for social justice in a variety of contexts within inner cities throughout the nation (Ginwright, 2006, 2007, 2010; Ginwright & James, 2002; HoSang, 2003; Kirshner, 2006; Kwon, 2006; Watkins, 2009). There are, however, some challenges youth

workers endure in civic engagement and youth activism literature; Ben Kirshner (2006), often cites some of these challenges in his work. Kirshner (2006) has explored how the pedagogical strategies employed by youth workers in CBYOs – that focus on activism, has been largely left out of youth studies literature. He cites initial distrust of youth workers by young people as a common barrier to adult-youth relationship building in community-based programs for activism. Further, Kirshner (2006) also suggests that youth workers experience tension when trying to provide guidance to novice youth activists while trying to maintain a “youth-led” or “youth centered” CBYO. Striking a balance between youth-led and adult-input has proved to be challenging in some programs; to account for this concern, Kirshner (2006) offers an “apprenticeship learning” model, in which the model is youth centered and organized democratically so that youth workers can foster a sense of community and safety.

This body of literature is important, as it brings to the forefront how Black youth and other youth of color are resisting negative framing and expectations defined by society and becoming powerful agents of change within their schools and communities. My purpose for drawing upon this specific literature is to show how imagining Black youth as civically engaged youth activists says something about the program structure and most importantly the way the youth workers construct the program with a particular understanding about the capacity that Black youth have to be agents of change despite the structures that make achieving academic success and social mobility tenuous. It also shows the dilemmas that some youth workers encounter in trying to remain youth centered, but at the same time provide the proper guidance to not only approach and combat hostile social forces, but to also imagine young people as knowledgeable change agents within their communities.

### **Chapter Summary**

Some of the literature explored in this chapter has shown that thinking about young people in general as community builders and agents of change is a pivotal step in changing the meta narrative and imagining of youth in general (Finn & Checkoway, 1998). This review of literature has drawn upon studies that examine the struggles, opportunities, and various forms of resistance in CBYOs and other out-of-school contexts to effect educational and social change. What stands out about this review of literature as it relates to community youth programming and Black youth, is that framing and imagining is important, yet sometimes not explicitly stated.

Looking closely at literature examining the role of Black Civil Society is reassuring in the sense that programs geared towards Black youth can be established with the *whole child* in mind; and more importantly with an understanding of the complex and multifaceted structural, political and social problems that plague Black urban centers. However, more research is needed to explore more explicitly the imagining and framing of Black youth transpiring today in CBYOs, as community programs are being looked to as national models for youth development and healing in urban Black communities (Ginwright, 2009).

For these reasons, this ethnographic study was needed to provide an in-depth look inside the youth workers' complicated work with Black youth students in Harlem. The next chapter captures the ever-changing cultural and social landscape of Harlem and explores the history and present work of Educational Excellence in such a setting. An overview of the youth workers studied and the methodology framework and strategies is provided.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**A Changing Harlem and the Educational Excellence Program<sup>5</sup>**

Harlem is an intellectually and culturally rich setting to study a community-based organization. Indeed, Harlem is one of the most famous neighborhoods in the world due to its rich intellectual and cultural history and present. Harlem has a long history of mobilizing for justice and equality as a center of Black cultural achievement (Jackson, 2001; Rhodes-Pitts, 2010). The Educational Excellence program (hereafter, referred to as EE) is housed in a famous building in Harlem where many revolutionary figures like Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Fidel Castro, James Baldwin, and Zora Neale Hurston met to collaborate and organize. At the same time, Harlem is also synonymous with violence, crime, poverty, and disenfranchisement (Jackson, 2001). As Jackson (2001) suggests, Harlem is much more economically and cultural diverse than the common description suggests. Additionally, demographic shifts, caused by gentrification and neoliberal transformation make Harlem an interesting place to study the work of a community-based organization (Freeman, 2006).

Particularly, youth are growing up in a different Harlem – one that is marked by gentrification, closure of businesses and the opening of high-end fashion boutiques, restaurants, and bars. Documented in *Harlem on Our Minds*, Valerie Kinloch (2007) explores how young people are impacted by the gentrification in Harlem and the expansion by Columbia University into West Harlem. Several youth workers in this study are native New Yorkers and have seen many changes in Harlem and throughout the city. Some appreciate the benefits of having healthier food options, but are frustrated with the lack of reverence for the Black cultural vibrancy Harlem is known for, which is reflected in Black bodies moving, working, and creating in the community.

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym- Program name has been changed

“I just think of a place that carries a lot of history as well as a community that has a lot of needs that are not being met... Historically speaking, I look at it as an African American community, rich in culture and history, but it's changed I mean in multiple ways...” says Dr. Davenport who grew up in New York City. This change was discussed frequently in my interviews with staff members. Alexandria, a California native, and New Jersey resident at the time, saw the influx of high-end stores as a plan to get low-income residents to spend money on frivolous material goods. Michaela, a Bronx native, said “students talk about the change occurring in Harlem often.” As an instructor for the program, I have witnessed, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders’ frustration by many of the changes in Harlem. Some students angrily comment about the City Sight Tour bus lines that cruise down 125<sup>th</sup> Street multiple times a day and the growing presence of White residents in the area.

As I discussed earlier, the theoretical underpinnings of this study are interconnected and address the tensions between structural and cultural explanations for responses to poverty, racial discrimination, and unemployment within urban city contexts. After the height of the crack epidemic during the 80s, community-based non-profit programs were established through the support of the government as well as through the efforts of community residents (Ginwright, 2009). Over the past few years, Harlem has been in the spotlight of national media attention as programs like the Harlem Children’s Zone have been recognized for their work with youth and families in Central Harlem. Harlem, as the neighborhood context for a study in a community-based educational space, is compelling because of the deep pockets of concentrated poverty, which places Black and Brown youth at an educational disadvantage, despite its current population and economic shifts.

## **Inside Educational Excellence**

Located a few steps away from Harlem's legendary 125<sup>th</sup> Street, Educational Excellence (hereafter, referred as EE) is a Harlem-based community education program that serves primarily Black and Latina/o middle and high school youth. In 1989, a White male philanthropist founded and funded EE with his own money and the help of other wealthy colleagues. The organization's original purpose was to help low-income students achieve academic success and enter four-year universities. Initially, EE developed partnerships with middle schools in Harlem and offered after-school tutoring, mentorship, and fostered relationship building adults and students through games and trips around New York City.

Over the last ten years, under the leadership of the current executive director, Dr. Leah Davis (Pseudonym), the organization has developed new recruitment strategies and a new structure. According to the website and in formal and casual conversations to outsiders, EE now characterizes itself as a "college completion and youth development organization." It no longer has formal partnerships with specific schools; rather, it recruits participants from schools, parent groups, and student groups from across New York City. Families with students in the program often recruit other participants for the program through word of mouth. Students enter the program in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and are considered members through their graduation from college.

As described on the organization's website, EE is a college prep and completion program for "high potential New York City public school students." EE also states that its purpose is to help students who are motivated to realize their college dreams, and develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to become tomorrow's leaders.

The program is divided into three specific divisions, the Middle School Division (MS), High School Division (HS), and Youth Leadership Development and Counseling Division

(YLD),<sup>6</sup> which was established to provide students with opportunities for social and emotional development through after-school courses, overnight retreats, and personal counseling. Prior to Dr. Davis' leadership, the program did not have the YLD. At the programmatic level, EE provides youth with academic assistance, college preparation, Regents test preparation, psychological counseling, service-learning opportunities domestic and abroad, youth leadership and development training, which include courses on social identity, including but not limited to, race/ethnicity, nationality, gender, social class, religion, and sexuality. Each division has its own goals that are aligned with the organizations' overall mission.

The MS Division helps students and their families navigate New York City's high school choice system and help youth develop quality applications for New York's competitive high schools. Middle school students participate in a variety of elective courses, math and English courses, and YLD courses, which focus on youth development, pro-abstinence, and critical media literacy. The HS division focuses on helping youth access higher education. High school students also experience a number of YLD courses, which are mainly centered on social identity awareness, self-esteem and awareness, and service projects. During weekly classes, both middle and high school students take English and Math courses, test preparation, elective courses, which can include anything from art, psychology, law, and business. Both middle and high school students attend a daylong or overnight youth development retreat in the spring. High school seniors are also taken on an overnight retreat in the spring semester. College students return to the program during their winter break for a special conference catered to their needs as college underclassmen or upperclassmen. Information about internships and job opportunities are provided, in addition to assisting students through social and emotional issues they may be

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<sup>6</sup> The actual department names are not used to protect the identity of the program.

dealing with while away from home. As an insider and ethnographer at EE, I observed, attended, and/or participated in each of these courses and events during the data collection period.

**Students at Educational Excellence.** When the program began over twenty years ago, Latina/o students made up most of EE's population. This was the result of a partnership the organization held with a nearby school whose population was majority Latina/o. I learned from Leah that as the number of Black students in EE increased, many Latina/o parents pulled their students out of the program. EE's original recruitment strategy entailed partnering with schools in Harlem and Washington Heights. As EE began branching out to other areas of the city, they no longer sought formal relationships with schools. Now, EE primarily serves Black youth from American, Caribbean, Latin, and West and East African heritages. Black students now make up 73 percent of the population. Most of the remaining 24 percent of the students are Latino/as, hailing from mainly the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.<sup>7</sup> More than half of the student population is female.

As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the admissions criteria for EE mandates that they hold an 80 average and at least a 3 or 4 on Regents exams at the point of entry. Both parents and students must complete an interview with the Director of Admissions, Ms. Bernice Allan, and are notified of their acceptance via phone or email. Student selection is important to EE as it informs their outcomes and reputation. According to the organization's Annual Report, 90 percent of students get accepted into competitive high schools, 95 percent of EE students matriculate from 4-year universities, and 28 percent go on to pursue advanced degrees.

**Funding at Educational Excellence.** The organization is primarily financially supported from foundation grants (46 percent), 15 percent of their financial support comes from

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<sup>7</sup> This statistic is complex as many of the Latina/o students in EE are racially Black – defined by phenotype, and are ethnically Latina/o.



corporations, 36 percent comes from private donations, and less than 1 percent comes from the federal government. Like many non-profit community-based programs serving low-income populations, EE constantly seeks grants and funding opportunities to support its work with young people. The executive director, Leah Davis, and the director of development, Patrick Denny, spend the majority of their day searching for opportunities to increase funding for the organization. Currently, the program serves approximately 400 students (6<sup>th</sup> grade through college). Throughout the day-to-day flow of the program, money seems to be a constant topic of conversation among staff members. As I will show in Chapter 7, EE's quest for funding highlights tensions in how potential donors frame and imagine Black youth.

Prior to the economic downturn, the organization had plans to expand its services to other boroughs. Although the plan to expand is not off the table, efforts are currently being made to maintain consistent enrollment of EE's current students. Though most staff would agree that they have outgrown the current space – classrooms are overcrowded and courses provided by the YLD Division, which are designed to include deep and reflective discussion, are becoming too large to have a meaningful discussion about personal matters students experience in their schools, homes, and in their neighborhoods.

**The Day-to-Day at EE.** Inside a historic Harlem building, Educational Excellence shares a block with fast food restaurants, bodegas, and discount thrift stores. EE's actual space is relatively small considering the 300 hundred students served. EE is located on a floor that is structured in a manner that gives the appearance that there are three separate sections. Stepping off the elevator, to the right is the center space where many program staff members' offices are located. In this space, there are flags from at least 50 colleges and universities covering the spaces blue walls and the perimeter of the area that staff members have collected over the

program's 22-year history. These flags are typically collected when students go on college tours throughout the year. Around the corner from this section of the floor is another area that consists of administrative staff offices. These staff members have the least amount of interaction with students. To an outsider, this area may seem hidden. From the left of the elevator, the rest of the space is comprised of seven classrooms, a small library used as a small meeting space, and two computer labs for students. The walls in this section are lined with photographs of students' experiences in the program. One wall holds the entire history of EE's service-learning program in which students have traveled to other US states and abroad, learning about other cultures, exchanging ideas with young people, and providing community service.

During the weekday, EE's floor is typically quiet between the hours of 10:00am and 3:30pm. Only youth workers and support staff are present, usually working in their office or meeting with one another. Between 3:30pm-4:00pm, students begin to trickle in from school to attend EE's after-school courses. Because of the structure of the program, as well as its limited space, students are given a certain number of days to be present each week. Middle school students attend 3 times a week, 2 weekdays and on Saturdays, while high school students come 1 to 2 times a week. The program designs courses so that as students get older they are required to take fewer courses. This allows juniors and seniors to hold internships and complete college applications. Also, youth workers select junior students who they feel are capable of handling college level classes at a nearby college.

When students step onto the floor, they go to their respective division, middle school or high school, to check in with their program coordinators. As they wait for their classes to begin at 4:30pm, students gather in the lounge. Some do their homework, some read, and others play board and card games provided by the organization with staff interns and volunteers. Between

these hours, the volume in the space increases and the floor becomes lively and full of energy and laughter. Staff members use this time to talk with (or track down) students about their grades, attendance in the program (or lack thereof), or to understand personal issues students might have. On some occasions, EE board members or prospective funders can stop by during these hours to meet with the executive directors, observe space and class sessions.

### **Youth Workers at Educational Excellence**

Each EE staff member at the beginning of the data collection period was interviewed individually (N=20) and observed during staff meetings, organization events, and interaction with coworkers and student participants. 16 participants identify as Black of African decent, 1 identified as Latina, 1 identified as biracial, and 2 identified as White. Five of the participants are “senior staff” members who oversee programming and hiring for the organization, and directly manage the development of curriculum. Seven of the youth workers are “program staff” – individuals who work directly with youth either through designing and teaching after-school courses or providing psychological services to youth. Six participants are “administrative staff” members who assist other staff members in carrying out their work and organize the admissions process of the organization. This group of youth workers also has regular contact with parents, board members, and donors for the organization. Three participants were temporary staff members who assisted the organization in hiring and retaining volunteers.

As noted earlier, the permanent full time and part time staff members were the primary participants in this study. However, I did not include counseling interns who are not paid staff members and rotate every year.<sup>8</sup> During the data collection period, the organization went through a period of major turnover. This turnover was especially intense for the program coordinator

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<sup>8</sup> Counseling interns are completing fieldwork for their master’s programs in counseling psychology at nearby universities.

position in the high school department. During a staff retreat, jokes were made about this particular position being an “ejector’s seat.” Since the beginning of data collection, 4 people have filled this position. The first person to hold this position lasted approximately 3 months before quitting and within her last two weeks was fired due to her negative tone with staff members and lack of task completion. The second person quit after only being in the position for 1 month. The third person, Omari Anderson, a participant in this study, held this position for approximately 6 months before being let go right before an international service-learning trip. His supervisor, Terry Niles, stated that he was not a good match for the organization. Although initially angered by the decision, Omari agreed that his passions were in another field. The person currently in this position, Benjamin Taylor, joined the program as a temporary volunteer coordinator for the organization. Initially, Benjamin was interviewed from his perspective as a volunteer coordinator. Benjamin was interviewed a second time after being in his new position for about three months. Over the course of the data collection period, 6 staff members left the organization (including the aforementioned), either by choice to pursue other job opportunities or graduate degrees, or because they were not considered to be a match with the organization’s mission and goals. The turnover was not anticipated at the beginning of the study; nonetheless, it proved to be a salient factor in many of the themes that emerged from interviews and informal conversations with participants with regard to how staff is expected to imagine and interact with students. Also important to this issue is the ability of youth workers to “keep up” with the face-paced and unpredictable culture of youth work. I

There is a huge range in the length of time participants have been employed at the site. Some have been at the site for less than a month, while others have been working in the site for close to ten years. All participants have interaction with youth in some form, either during

programming time, which occurs on weekdays during after-school hours, on Saturdays, or on selected weekends throughout the academic year. While some staff members have more interaction with youth than others, understanding how all of them frame and imagine the youth they serve was important to include in this study as they are a part of the ‘collective imagining’ that shapes the space created for youth participants.

*A closer look at EE youth workers.* Staff members at EE have divergent, yet similar upbringings and educational experiences. Ninety-five percent of the staff members hold an undergraduate degree; and fifty percent hold advanced degrees. Three staff members currently hold doctorate degrees and three others are pursuing doctorates. The majority of staff members were born and raised in the Tri-State area, mainly New York and New Jersey. Other staff members were born and raised in other parts of the country. Some staff members were traditional classroom teachers before coming to community-based educational work, while others had significant experience in community advocacy and law enforcement. Additionally, some youth workers are graduate students studying issues related to education who also have experience working in community-based programs within and outside of New York City. The educational pedigree of the staff has been both a surprise and intimidating according to some youth workers.

Throughout my discussion of the findings, I will reveal important insights about the background of EE youth workers and how they came to “youth work” to understand how their own personal and educational experiences shape their habitus and imagining of youth in the program. More detailed information about participants is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Participant Information** (The names of participants and organizational divisions have been changed to protect the identity of the participants in the program.)

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Age Range	Race	Educational Background	Length of time	Position Description
Dr. Leah Davis	40-50	Black	BA, Ed.M, Ed.D	10	Executive director and president of program; serves on board of directors; raises funds; media appearances
Monica Matthews	40-50	Black	BA, MFA	10	Vice president of programs; supervises MS, HS, and YLD directors; advisor to curriculum development
Walidah Thomas	30-40	Black	BA, Ed.M	4	Director of middle school programming; curriculum developer; hires instructors; oversees Saturday and Summer programs
Terry Niles	30-40	Black	BA, J.D	9	Director of high school programming; Director of middle school programming; curriculum developer; hires instructors; prepares students for college
Faith Davenport	40-50	Black	BA, MA, PhD	9	Director of youth leadership + counseling; curriculum developer; student therapist; coordinates student retreats + parent conference
Saul Modupe	30-40	Black	Some College	6	Youth development instructor for male students, grades 6 – 10; curriculum developer; oversees youth fraternity
Camille Kent	20-30	Black	BA, MA	1	Counseling director; supervises counseling interns; student therapist; assist with youth development instruction
Alexandria Jimenez	20-30	Afro-Latina (bi-racial)	BA, MS	5	Associate director for HS dept; coordinates college program; guides senior students; mentors college students
Benjamin Tucker	20-30	White	BA	1.5	Recruits volunteers/Provides logistical support to HS dept; manages database for HS students; oversees student leadership group
Omari Anderson	20-30	Black	BA	Less than a year (terminated)	Provides logistical support to HS dept; manages database for HS students; oversees student leadership group

Michaela Delgado	20-30	Dominican/Puerto Rican	BA	7	Associate director for MS dept; curriculum developer; conducts teacher development; logistical support to MS dept
Patrick Denny	30-40	Black	BA	Less than a year	Director of development; sits on board of directors; seeks funds; grant writer
Patricia Douglas	20-30	Black	BA, MA	Less than a year (terminated)	Development assistant – supports the Director of development; grant writer; wrote newsletter
Bernice Allan	Over 60	Black	BA, MS	5	Admissions coordinator; recruits students; interviews + orients new students + parents
Cynthia Gladys	40-50	Black	BA	4	Finance executive; advises board of the directors; manages org budget
Simone Classon	20-30	Black	BA	3	Assists financial director; assists with audits/budgets; human resources
Janelle Campbell	20-30	Black	BA	2	Administrative liaison between all departments; manages org database
Ayoka Taiwo	20-30	Black	BA	Temporary 1 year	Volunteer Fellow – recruits + hires volunteers
Rachel Atkinson	20-30	White	BA	Temporary 1 year	Volunteer Fellow – recruits+ hires volunteers
Belinda Arrington	20-30	Black	BA, MA	6 months	Associate director for HS dept; coordinates college program; guides senior students; mentors colleges students

## Goals of Study

Considering the ways in which structural constraints operate in the lives of low-income Black youth, thusly impacting their educational and social experiences, this dissertation explores how community-based youth organizations have become recognized as viable entities to support the development of youth. More specifically, this study is focused on how national discourse has positioned community-based youth programs as solutions to structural and social problems within urban contexts, which has consequences for the framing and imagining of Black youth in these spaces. Thus, I examine how youth workers at EE frame and imagine Black youth and the context in which their organization exists, and how that framing and imagining shapes their

pedagogical practices. Therefore, this study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do youth workers at Educational Excellence, frame and imagine the Black youth participants in their program?
2. How do youth workers' sense making of the social and political conditions, in which their organization exists, shapes their imagining of Black youth in the program?
  - a. How does youth workers' imagining of Black youth shape their pedagogical practices?
3. How does Educational Excellence, as an institution, frame and imagine Black youth participants?
  - a. How does the collective imagining of Black youth participants by youth workers shape program structure and organizational practices?

With participant observations as the primary mode of data collection, a total of thirteen months was spent in the field. I also collected numerous organizational documents, wrote copious field notes, conducted formal interviews with youth workers, and held focus groups with youth workers for greater depth.

Also important to the design of this study, is my employment at EE as a part-time youth development counselor. My relationship to EE gave me an insider perspective (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). While this may seem problematic to some who may be concerned that my dual roles as an employee and researcher would make me too subjective and thereby compromise the reliability and validity of my work, I found that my position as a youth worker at this particular site situates me as an "insider" with the opportunity to engender greater access and generate trust between myself and participants. Further, it also helped to generate "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) and engender deeper meaning (Maxwell, 2005) about the ideology and practices of youth workers at Educational Excellence.

### **Positionality: A Case for Insider Research**

For over a decade, I have worked with young people in community programs and recognize the dearth of academic scholarship on the youth workers who carry out this valuable



work. The aim of this study was to explore youth workers' understanding of their work and students. As I have demonstrated throughout the first and second chapters, there is insufficient scholarship that addresses how youth workers frame and imagine the young people they serve in community-based spaces. As an insider at EE, I was afforded access to the organization in ways that an outsider would not have received.

While authors Brannick and Coghlan (2007) argue that Alveeson's (2003) perspective of an insider makes this form of research seem almost incidental, they contend that "insider" research should be more formal, structured, and well thought out. Brannick and Coghlan's (2007) argue that all researchers can be considered insiders throughout some aspect of their life, either within their families, communities, or organizations. They further contend that a reflexive awareness is a critical element to conducting research as an insider. Although, complete "objectivity" is considered to be ideal and what makes research the most valid, some methodologists make the case that objectivity is a fallacy in that all researchers hold a number of subjectivities in which they bring with them to their research (Maxwell, 2005; Peshkin, 1988). Further, as Brannick and Coghlan suggest in their work, having an insider perspective situates the researcher in a reflexive position where their insight of the site of study can assist the research project in ways perhaps an outsider could not, primarily due to issues of access and trust. There is a valuable body of empirical inquiry conducted by insider researchers that has offered a beneficial contribution to social theory and education research (see Dimitriadis, 2001; Hill, 2009; Khan, 2010; and Mills, 2000).

As an insider and researcher at EE, I was constantly aware of the biases that I hold and could potentially bring to this study. In order to ensure that my role as an insider did not contaminate the research process and results, I employed validity checks, by having a group of

colleagues from different fields read my formal interview protocol guides to ensure that questions were not leading or trying to prove a point (Maxwell, 2005). I also used member-checking strategies, and gave youth workers the opportunity to review their interview transcripts. Only 5 of the 20 youth workers wanted to view their transcripts, and only 1 person made a change by retracting a comment.

My role as a youth worker was critical to this study, and helped bolster my analysis and theoretical contribution about the complex educational processes within out-of-school time community-based spaces. My lens as a youth worker and researcher were invaluable to this study and helped to explain the richness of the data.

### **Reciprocity**

Reciprocity, or the responsibility to not only study and disclose educational and social problems, but to assist in eradicating them – through building knowledge that can inform practice or being of service in other ways to the people and institutions we research (Marwell, 2006; Siddle-Walker, 1999), is an important philosophy at the crux of this research. As previous work on community-based spaces suggest, the nature of these organizations revolve around close relationships with those in the space (Ginwright, 2007, 2009; O’Donoghue, 2006; McLaughlin, 2000). As Marwell (2006) suggests, reciprocity – an exchange with or deep commitment to the study’s participants is critical in community-based settings, especially where young people or other vulnerable groups are present. Additionally, many community-based groups serving marginalized groups have concerns with researchers entering their sites and exiting without commitment or awareness of the impact their presence has on individuals or the community as a whole (Marwell, 2006; Siddle-Walker, 1998). This issue is deeply important to me as a researcher and as a youth worker.

As a youth worker at EE, I continued to teach after-school courses on youth development to middle and high school students during the week and on Saturdays throughout the data collection period. I also participated in a few tasks I would not have normally be assigned, such as writing course outlines for EE's summer program and leading professional development workshops for fellow youth workers. My contribution, in the spirit of reciprocity, was to create opportunities for research and evaluation for the YLD division. I spearheaded a proposal to have high school students serve as "research fellows" to develop a youth participatory action research project (YPAR) for the organization. In addition to fulfilling my responsibilities as a part-time instructor, I obtained approval from EE's directors to attend staff meetings and special events as a participant observer throughout the data collection process. Outside of my teaching responsibilities, I would also stay later than my allotted hours and come in on my days off to observe courses and staff meetings. In doing so, the knowledge I gained from these strategies were critical in helping me make sense of processes occurring in the space and how youth workers made sense of these processes.

### **Methodology: Critical Ethnography**

Qualitative research has been defined as a systematic and planned empirical inquiry into meaning, an orientation grounded in the "world of experience" to understand how others make sense of their experiences (Shank, 2002), and a perspective that involves both an interpretive and naturalistic approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In short, qualitative researchers "study" individuals, communities, and phenomena in their own "natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Ethnography, a tradition born out of qualitative methodology, was chosen for this study in order to learn and in my case, re-learn the cultural practices of participants at

Educational Excellence and to capture the richness of meaning making by being immersed in the organization.

Employing an ethnographic methodology, I ground this study in an orientation that allows me to understand how individuals construct meaning from their experiences by entering my participants' "conceptual world" (Geertz, 1973) by being immersed in the day-to-day flow of the organization practices of my participants. In order to enter youth worker's conceptual world, I used a critical ethnographic approach, which seeks to gain insight and understanding by considering the totality of the entire social context in which participants operate (Anderson, 1989; Dimitriadis, 2001). Because of this orientation in which my study is grounded, I was deliberate about being present in the space to observe youth workers and their practices as frequently as possible.

What makes this ethnography a critical one is my attention to and understanding of participants in their historical, cultural, and social realities (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Madison, 2005). This epistemological frame was imperative for this study in order to understand how youth workers' thinking about and practices with Black youth were shaped by these realities. Additionally, employing this methodological framework was useful as critical theory is considered to be "the doing" of critical theory (Fine, 1994, Madison, 2005). Further it also considers the importance of my positionality as youth worker-researcher which was essential in understanding the deep ways in which youth workers' made sense of social problems and their work with Black youth in Harlem.

### **Research Design**

A critical ethnographic approach to this study allowed me to address the proposed research questions which seek to understand how youth workers make sense of the social

context in which their program exists, how they frame and imagine the Black students they serve, and how their individual and collective imagining of Black youth might shape the way they develop curricula and pedagogical methods. These questions required a methodological approach that engenders a full understanding of how youth workers imagine Black youth and their daily interactions in order to understand their curricula design and pedagogic practices for working with youth, in addition to their day-to-day interactions.

In his discussion of “thick description,” Geertz (1973) posits that thick description is indeed an ethnographic practice, as participants in their own conceptual world deserve deeper a description of their cultural practices and life experiences. Geertz describes ethnographic description as an interpretive process and seeks to engage informants as “persons rather than objects” (p. 9). This particular point is a vital perspective that I held in my study. Viewing my participants as people situated in their own contextual worlds and not merely as objects to be studied is important. An ethnographic qualitative approach to this dissertation allowed me to gain insight from the daily practices of the youth workers within the program by being immersed in the day-to-day flow of the organization.

The intimacy created with the organization itself and the relationship established with staff members, both as coworker and researcher, was invaluable to my study. Through a critical ethnographic research design, employing participant observations, interviews and focus groups with youth workers, document analysis, and student assessments, this examines the particular ways that youth are “framed” and “imagined” within the institution. The study also demonstrates how these understandings inform and limit the cultural, social, and pedagogical practices of the institution. This dissertation intimately explores the work of EE through the hearing the voices and experiences of the staff members. Insights from this work can provide

greater understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of these programs, which in turn can contribute to the discourse regarding educational innovations for marginalized youth.

**Data collection: Strategies and techniques.** In order to stress the importance of validity, I designed my study to employ a variety of qualitative methods – using what Cho and Trent (2006) describe as triangulation. Triangulation is defined as the use of multiple methods to avoid the deficiencies that come from using a single method (Denzin, 1989). This study employed a variety of qualitative methods to ensure reliability and validity. For example, triangulation was employed to strengthen the validity of my data. Triangulation methods included one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Including individual in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting between one and two hours with youth workers. Participant observations were the primary mode and method of data collection. As an insider, I had complete access to regular staff meetings between program directors, classroom observations, special events involving parents and community members, and entire access to the space where youth participants and staff members interacted daily. Other qualitative methodological approaches were used to supplement the observations over the course of the data collection period: Focus groups with youth workers, document analysis of program literature, which includes, documents that are provided to schools, parents, students, as well as information that is posted on the program’s website and located throughout the site. I also reviewed student assessments from class instructors from the last two years in order to understand how students were being discussed within the classroom context.

Additionally, my long-term involvement in the field, transcribing individual interviews and focus groups verbatim (some interviews were transcribed by a transcription service), note taking during participant observations, and writing consistent descriptive and reflective field

notes greatly increased the validity of my study (Maxwell, 2005). To account for reliability, I employed member-checking strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and offered each participant an opportunity to see their transcripts. Only five participants wished to see their transcripts. Those who declined stated that they trusted that the information was correct. In subsequent sections, I provide a detail description of the methods employed in this study.

***Participant observations and field notes.*** Participant observations occurred at large scale program events for youth and their families, including middle and high school retreats, staff retreats, parent orientation meetings and program staffs' curriculum and planning meetings (N=10). I planned to attend a board meeting, but was unable to get permission in time. Descriptive and reflective field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) were taken after each workday (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007), including conversations with fellow staff members that related to the study's guiding questions. Due to my insider perspective and "preunderstanding" (Gummesson, 2000), I can be considered an observing participant (Alveeson, 1987) versus a participant observer. This particular methodological approach was essential to answering my research questions for a few reasons. First, as this study explored how youth workers frame and imagine young people, observing how Black youth are discussed in spaces where they are not present (i.e. planning meetings, board meetings, etc.) is critical to understand how they are discussed with curriculum planning and pedagogy in mind. Second, observing large-scale events where youth are present was also important to examine. Understanding how youth workers' pedagogical practices and engagement with youth, and students' reaction to these practices was important to observe.

***One-on-one interviews.*** Individual interviews were held with twenty (N=20) youth workers/staff. Individual interviews with participants were critical for the purpose of the study

and research questions. I wanted to understand how youth workers frame and imagine the Black students they work with. My aim was to seek an understanding of how they make sense of the structural constraints their program exists within and how they might shape either their pedagogical practice, treatment of youth, or feelings about their work. Further, I sought an in-depth exploration of how and why youth workers came to this particular field of work and the site of study. Questions centered on participants' social identities, including but not limited to their understanding of race, ethnicity, social class, and the meaning they make from these understandings. It was important to understand how they "see" inequality, and how they understand and imagine Black youth. Using individual interviews allowed participants to reflect deeply on their experiences as current educators within a community-based space and how they got their current positions. In November 2011, a follow up interview with Benjamin, the current Program Coordinator for the HS Division, was conducted because he was initially interviewed as a volunteer coordinator.

All individual interviews were semi-structured in-depth, open-ended interviews that lasted between 60 and 150 minutes and were audio recorded. These open-ended, semi-structured interviews were important in eliciting deeper and reflective responses from participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Interviews occurred in many of the offices of participants, empty classrooms, one was conducted in a public library, and another was held at a café close to the site. Participants were given the choice of where they wanted to be interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded and stored electronically on my password-protected personal computer. Participants were informed that their participation in this study was completely voluntary. Furthermore, their personal identity and the organization's identity will be kept strictly confidential. All participants were aware that the study was being conducted and they all agreed



to participate. Since youth workers at EE closely work together in the same space, I explained that their responses in interviews and focus groups would be kept confidential. The organization and participants are referred to throughout this dissertation by a pseudonym to protect their identities.

***Focus groups.*** Focus groups are useful as they help to create environments where participants may be able to speak more freely about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Sociological studies using focus groups have noted that focus groups have been critical in giving a voice to marginalized groups (Morgan, 1996). Moreover, feminist researchers have claimed that focus groups can allow participants to have some level of control over their interactions (Nichols-Casebolt & Spakes, 1995; Montell, 1995). Combined with individual interviews, focus groups can help determine the range of experiences and perspectives participants may have, which may also lead to follow up individual interviews (Duncan & Morgan, 1994). During each focus group, participants were candid and fed off of each other's ideas. Further, the focus group also gave them an opportunity to discuss their curricula – how it currently operates and how they wished it could be. The absence of supervisors and supervisees allowed conversation to flow more candidly.

A total of three focus groups, lasting between one hour and an hour and a half, were held with participants. Focus groups were audio-recorded. The groups were formed based on the similarity of participants' work in the program. The first focus group, held in April of 2011, was conducted with Associate Directors (2) and Program Coordinators (2); a Director supervises each of these participants. The second focus group, held in June of 2011, encompassed three (3) temporary employees who were hired to assist the organization in hiring and organizing short term and long term volunteers. The final focus group, conducted in July 2011, gathered the three

(3) directors who oversee the high school, middle school, and youth leadership and counseling departments. Participants were grouped in this way for a few reasons. First, most staff members have worked together for many years and have amazing rapport with one another. While observing staff meetings during the collection period, I noticed that staff members not only solicit ideas and feedback from each other about their work, they actually enjoy being with each other. While this is not true for all participants, I knew that holding focus groups would generate much debate and conversation about important issues that impact their jobs and relationship with students. Focus groups were divided based on the similarities of their job responsibilities and the power dynamics between positions. For example, all participants who were the heads of their departments were participants in the same focus group. They all report to the same person and are responsible for supervising a small group of staff members. They each are responsible for running critical programs that are major features of the organization; they also share similar triumphs and struggles. Thirdly, in order to truly understand how staff frame and imagine Black youth in the program, it was important for them to engage in dialogue about the political, social, and educational issues that impact Black youth. Utilizing focus groups allowed greater understanding of the similarities and differences in thought and practice of youth workers.

***Collection of organizational literature.*** Using Altheide's (1987) method of ethnographic content analysis (ECA), which collects both numerical and narrative data and is a process that checks, supplements, and "supplants prior theoretical claims by simultaneously obtaining categorical and unique data for every case studied" (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). This approach was helpful as it allowed me to numerically capture particular terms and frames used to frame Black youth in organizational literature.

I gathered organizational literature including brochures, parent newsletters (via email or

hard copies), annual reports from the past five years, literature posted around the public space (bathrooms, posters, flyers), admissions literature, instructor's class reports which assess student behavior, and course curricula descriptions. I chose all of these documents because I wanted to understand how the imagining of students was reflected in the framing of youth within organizational literature. I gathered a wide range of documents from the organization – those that are disseminated to potential funders, youth participants, and their families, as well as those presented to student members. I analyzed each text for the frequency of certain key words and phrases. Collecting organizational literature helped me assess how the program frames youth throughout literature distributed to not only its youth participants, but also parents and potential funders.

This method was important because it helped to solicit data that may not come up in the other methods used in this study. Further, EE youth participants are often framed in program literature as a selling point to donors, advertisement for schools, as well as parents and potential youth participants. This is important to note as the way youth are framed in program literature can reflect the ways that youth workers imagine the young people they serve. While individual interviews and focus groups can provide critical data that shows how youth workers make sense of their experiences in their role, and how they frame and imagine the Black students they serve, analyzing organizational literature captured how this framing and imagining is distributed which also shapes additional narratives about Black youth in the program.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative studies often incur a tremendous amount of data and careful selection on which data to use is an important part of the analytical process (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). After obtaining all data, I read and re-read through interview transcripts, observational notes,

field notes, and data retrieved from organizational literature. Descriptive and reflexive note taking occurred after each data collection method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Central to my analysis was an ongoing transcribing and coding process throughout the study. First, I applied a descriptive coding process, in which I summarized attributes of a particular case with an easily identifiable label (Richards, 2005). Secondly, I used “topic coding” to label text as categories, followed by an analytical coding process in which I created new categories based on the concepts and ideas that emerge as I reflected on the data collected (Richards, 2005). My analytic codes were designed to correspond to my theoretical framework. See Table 2.

**Table 2. Analytical Codes and Descriptions**

<b>Frameworks</b>	<b>Analytic Codes and Descriptions</b>
Habitus	SCT – Structure Culture Tension DHE – Demand High Expectations IBY – Imagining Black Youth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ NRL – Negotiation Race and Language</li> <li>▪ SOS – Selection of Students</li> </ul>
Critical Pedagogy	PE – Pedagogy and Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ POR – Power of Relationship</li> <li>▪ SE – Staff Expectations</li> <li>▪ SS – Staff Sacrifice</li> </ul> SP – Understanding Social Problems
Community Education	FON – Face of Neoliberalism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ CBO – Competition Community-based Orgs</li> <li>▪ CS – Charter School Competition</li> </ul> CCY – Community Change

In analyzing interviews, I took each transcript (individual and group interviews), reviewed statements that adequately describe participants experience; recorded relevant statements and eliminate repetitive ones; organized the meaning of these experiences into relevant themes; use these themes to generate concepts in order to describe the experiences of participants. This process resulted in twelve codes that described the cases and experiences of

participants. Using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method, the coding process required constant revision and modification until all categories were formed. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest, through an inductive process, open coding involves reviewing all text for descriptive categories, developing and refining each category until no new information yields any additional meaning (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Following the systematic coding process, I developed major themes and sub themes in which the initial twelve themes were collapsed and modified down to seven core themes and codes. These themes were then refined and considered for theoretical implications. After completing the coding process by hand, I uploaded all data into Dedoose, a qualitative and mixed methods online software. This was incredibly helpful for organizing interview transcripts, field notes, organizational literature, and media images.

The theoretical codes that emerged from the data were deep and substantial. I was able to draw important connections between youth workers' ideological reflections about their work with youth and the processes I observed by being immersed in the daily flow of the organization. Throughout Chapters 5, 6, and 7, these connections are clearly connected to the programmatic processes of EE and the ways in which youth workers make sense of them.

### **Limitations of Study Design**

I come to this work with a previously established relationship with the dissertation site. In the fall of 2008, I was employed as an elective teacher for ninth and tenth grade students. I am currently employed as a part-time staff member. My primary function is teaching youth development courses to sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth graders during after-school and weekend programming time. There are limitations to any study, and this study is not exempt from that reality. My dual role as an employee and researcher could have potentially shaped how participants answered questions in both individual interviews and focus groups. I was

conscious of my role as a coworker and researcher throughout the data collection process. I made sure to state the importance of keeping conversations confidential and ensured that participants' comments were not shared with their supervisors or supervisees.

Other limitations of this study may include not utilizing youth as participants in this study to understand how they make sense of how they are being framed and imagined by youth workers in the program. While I would have wanted to do this for the purpose of comparison, time constraints prevented me from including youth. Since there is minimal literature about the organizers, leaders, and youth workers within community-based educational spaces, I decided to solely focus on the experiences and sense making of youth workers. All community-based organizations that serve vulnerable populations do not have uniform practices and ideologies. Therefore, my study cannot be generalized to all community-based spaces serving Black youth; however, internal generalizability may be appropriate for this study as the organization might find some of the data useful for their work. Additionally, other community-based programs and youth workers may identify with some of the experiences and challenges of participants in this study.

### **Overview of Findings Chapters**

In the following chapters, I present the central themes to emerge from my data collection and analysis as they relate to and advance the theoretical framework described in Chapter Two. In these chapters, I describe the qualitative evidence of the triumphs and challenges that the youth workers at Educational Excellence experience daily from within a community-based educational program. These experiences elicit both tensions and contradictions within these youth workers as they struggle to simultaneously validate Black youths' sense of self and navigate an economic, political and social context that makes that process more difficult.

As an ethnographer and youth worker at Educational Excellence, I uncovered multiple tensions in the framing and imagining of Black youth, which thusly, informed the pedagogical practices and relationships between EE students and youth workers. I witnessed and felt the complexity of youth workers' challenge to frame and imagine Black youth from asset rich perspectives versus deficiency – a common framework defining these youth in particular, within community-based youth work. I discovered that youth workers, like many other social justice and grassroots activists – are forced to simultaneously work within and critique a system of which they are also a part.

I learned not only how difficult it is to support and maintain a social justice-oriented program in terms of providing necessary resources, but also how difficult it is for those who do the work of these organizations to fight against a dominant paradigm of Black youth as deficient, delinquent or just in need of “fixing.” Worse yet, so much of this framing comes from the very organizations that community-based programs, such as EE, must rely upon for their very existence. These issues and how youth workers see them impacting Black youth and their own pedagogy and engagement with youth were paramount to their understanding of why they do this type of work and the difficulty in continuing it.

I begin the process of conveying these tensions and contradictions across several dimensions of EE in Chapter Five, in which I examine youth workers' analysis and critique of the larger framing of Black youth by society and the education system, defined by the majority of them as a pervasive climate and culture of low expectations. Given their understanding of these prevalent low expectations for Black youth in the education system, EE staff members strive to set their organization apart from the larger societal deficit narrative of Black youth by developing

pedagogical practices and curricula that tap into the talents of youth and encourage critical inquiry.

Thus, the overarching theme to emerge from my research on youth workers is the depth of their penetrating critique of the larger framing and imagining of Black youth in society and public schools. Yet, at the same time, I explore the tensions and contradictions inherent within these youth workers who must simultaneously live within a society that perpetuates the very views of Black youth they struggle to overcome. Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in the findings I present in Chapter Five as youth workers explain their understanding of the multiple ways in which the NYC public schools have failed so many Black youth, mostly by defining them and their intelligence narrowly via standardized tests and discounting the social and political structures that shape their lives.

This penetrating critique of the public school system and larger society makes another finding discussed in this Chapter extremely ironic and thus a clear illustration of the contradictions inherent in this work. More specifically, I learned that the selection and admissions process, devised and implemented by EE staff when they select their participants from a large applicant pool is actually parallel and remarkably similar to the very school standards and accountability system that emphasizes test scores above all else.

Next, in Chapter Six, I explore some of the tensions EE youth workers must navigate in trying to create distance between the programs they provide and traditional schooling – e.g. how they simultaneously create a counter narrative but engage in some of the same imagining and constructing of lower expectations as too many public school educators do. I have found that maintaining a powerful counter narrative is difficult as some of the constraints traditional schools experience is similar within community-based organizations depending on their funding sources.



As I will show, EE youth workers' acts of resistance against deficit narratives and low expectations come across in their curricula development and pedagogical practices with youth. I also explore the ways in which staff members formally and informally assess students beyond academics, including informal cultural practices to capture their framing of students. Student participants are expected to look, behave, and speak a certain way that often limits or diminishes students' own cultural expressions. These same cultural standards also apply to youth workers at EE. By showing this process, I am able to explain how the framing of students is manifested in the cultural processes that EE condemns and also supports. Further, it also allows me to compare what staff members say they say *about* students to what they actually say *to* students.

And, lastly, in Chapter Seven, I explore the complex ways in which EE negotiates funding opportunities and competition with other community-based educational spaces, as these negotiations require a particular kind of framing of Black youth and evidence of impact or "outcome data" on student achievement that may or may not be congruent with how EE ultimately imagines its Black students. Also in this chapter, I try to illuminate the similarities and differences between the political constraints that are shared by traditional schools and community-based out-of-school time programs. I will explain how youth workers negotiate the influence of neoliberal educational reforms, how they are able to serve youth in their program, as well as the ways in which these reforms have changed the Harlem community surrounding Educational Excellence.

## CHAPTER 5

**Youth Workers' Critique of Schools and Society**

Centering my analysis around the defining theme of youth workers' sense-making of the social, political, and educational issues shaping Black youths' educational experiences—and how they simultaneously resist and capitulate to the framing and imagining of these youth—gives me greater understanding and insight into the precarious positioning of community-based organizations today.

This chapter, therefore, examines youth workers' critique of society and schools. Youth workers in this study were highly critical of the culture of high-stakes testing culture that students are forced to endure within schools. At the same time, although youth workers held very nuanced critical arguments about the public school system and laid out the ways the system is detrimental to Black youth, youth workers and the organization itself held students to some of the same markers of success, defined by high stakes-testing. Analyzing the process and procedures of student selection for the program provided insight into how staff members imagine the youth they serve and the stark difference in which they framed students who were not a part of the program or "EE Ready" as many explained. The selection of students in EE shows an interesting tension and contradiction regarding who the program claims it serves. Additionally, youth workers felt that schools perpetuate society's deficit framing and imagining of Black youth, and therefore I explain how they strive to hire others who share their same imagining of Black youth.

I also analyze in this chapter, the frameworks and process of admissions and selection at EE, as well as the multiple modes of assessments for youth participants in the program. Studying

the pathways youth workers design for new students to follow was critical in understanding the criteria and expectations that youth workers establish and hold students to.

### **The Public Imagining of Harlem, Schooling, and Black Youth**

As I noted in Chapter Four, EE is located in Harlem, one of the most famous neighborhoods in the world. Thus, this particular community-based educational space is physically centered on a block that simultaneously displays the deep concentration of poverty and joblessness that have plagued this community since the exodus of White affluent families during the early 1900s (Schaffer & Smith, 1986), as well as the rapidly growing signs of gentrification and demographic shifts as White and more affluent residents return. Caught amid those contradictions in Harlem and the comings and goings of the more privileged are Black youth and the youth workers who explored each of these concerns about Harlem during formal interviews and during several observations of staff meetings. Youth workers' feelings about Harlem were connected and intertwined with their broader understanding of larger political and social problems that shape education in New York City. Youth workers at EE held conflicting thoughts and responses to the poverty, disenfranchisement, violence, and marginalization of Harlem's Black and Brown poor, and to the ways in which gentrification or "urban renewal projects" in Harlem have changed the business and political terrain of Harlem as longtime, low-income residents are displaced by the wealthy (Freeman, 2006; Jackson, 2001). Both residential restructuring and commercial development have defined Harlem in the last twenty-five years (Schaffer & Smith, 1986). As youth workers and student participants from EE traverse Harlem's transformation, they hold strong critiques of these changes.

**"Harlem has lost its base."** Youth workers' feelings about Harlem itself were aligned with how they thought about broader societal and educational problems in that racial

discrimination, hyper-segregation, poverty, and rampant unemployment shaped their understanding of the inadequate educational resources Black youth receive. Particularly, youth workers who grew up in New York City reflected on Harlem with a sense of nostalgia in light of its rich history, culture, innovation, and activism. “I just think of a place that carries a lot of history,” explains Dr. Davenport, who also said that Harlem is “a community that has a lot of needs that are not being met.” Now in her late forties, Dr. Davenport was born and raised in New York City, and therefore has seen major transformation to both Harlem and other New York City boroughs.

While most youth workers interviewed discussed the lack of employment opportunities in Harlem or the hyper police surveillance of Black and Latino males in the neighborhood, they also discussed a deep concern about gentrification rapidly spreading across the area. Ms. Allan, the eldest member of the EE staff and Manhattan native, recalls her early memories of Harlem:

Well, Harlem is a symbol in my mind, although the definition of Harlem is drastically changing. When I think of Harlem, I think of the iconic Black American community, which is less and less true...what disturbs me about Harlem is years ago, many different economic groups that were African American lived in Harlem. So the different segments of the community could help each other. And that doesn't tend to be the case because the American dream is to move. To move someplace elsewhere you lose your base. So right now I feel like Harlem has lost its base.

Similarly to Ms. Allan, Omari, a 28-year-old Black man from Brooklyn, New York, also spoke of Harlem as having this “strong historical base” that at the same time, is marked by “drugs and crime” associated with low-income Black residents. The growing gentrification in Harlem, as described above by Ms. Allan, has shifted not only the demographics in Harlem but the landscape as well. Expensive boutique shops and restaurants have surfaced in Harlem, much to the dismay of youth workers at EE – especially those who are originally from the New York City area.

Monica, a senior staff member at EE for the last 10 years, was raised in suburban New Jersey but has lived and worked in New York City for fifteen years. She said, “Harlem feels now like two societies” and went on to explain how gentrification has shaped how Educational Excellence serves students and their families:

I’ve seen the gentrification roll through this community where young people, where a majority of our kids were coming from Harlem and Washington Heights, and a number of those families had to move to the Bronx and Westchester, which is why our Bronx numbers have gone up. We’re almost at 35 percent from the Bronx.

Here, it is evident that EE’s demographics have shifted over time due to the displacement of families as a result of gentrification – new businesses and new condos serving a vastly different clientele in a new Harlem. All youth workers interviewed discussed complex structural factors, such as racism and poverty shaping life in Harlem, as well as the schooling experiences and opportunities for youth in Harlem.

Youth workers often discuss what occurs in Harlem and elements of the neighborhood students interact with. Solomon, a 33-year-old Black male from East New York, has been with EE for seven years. As a youth worker with young males in the YLD Division, Solomon has a full understanding of the struggles that Black youth encounter. He once explained that before students even come to EE after-school programming, they have to navigate their way through neighborhoods. Solomon addresses the importance of helping students talk through the difficult things they see and experience outside of EE:

There were a few times where I did have to stop class and have a dialogue with them...with some experience they might have. You know, culturally or just on some violence as an extension of gender and race and social economics. You know, a student coming in like, “you I just saw this guy get stabbed” and I was just like, [sigh]. So dealing with that just before class and then ushering him into class and trying to find a way to keep his attention and keep him focused...

Youth workers link these issues to the symptoms of larger problems that are rooted in racial inequality, concentrated poverty, and political disenfranchisement. “My answer always starts with structural racism and classes of these institutions and structures that are created that provide real barriers to people who are on the fringe in some way, shape, or form,” explains Monica.

These structural issues are the same concerns youth workers describe as the major barriers to adequate educational experiences for Black youth. Youth workers at EE highlight various critical issues nested within institutional obstacles that are experienced by Black students in school. Their main concerns are the convoluted and cumbersome school-choice process in New York City, and the deficit imagining of Black youth, leading to incredibly low expectations set for Black students by school authority figures.

From these concerns, two things are clear from my analysis of the data: 1) youth workers possess a strong critique of society and school’s limited imagining of Black youth, and saw EE as a supplement for what schools were lacking and not providing Black youth academically, socially, and culturally; 2) although the youth workers I studied are extremely frustrated by school practices — such as high stakes testing and curriculum standardization — as an organization, EE employs some of these same practices in deciding which students to select and support for their program.

### **“There Is A Politic At Play:” Navigating School Barriers**

Youth workers often complained about schools setting the bar too low for Black students. Several youth workers discussed many flaws within the education system that inherently lowers expectations for Black and Brown students. Dr. Davis exclaimed during one of our interview “our kids do not have the luxury” not to have high academic standards and expectations set for

them. Setting low standards and expectations is reflected in how schools and society imagine Black youth, their capabilities, and what is possible for their lives.

As mentioned in the section above, virtually all youth workers interviewed shared concerns about Harlem and how its challenges were also experienced within schools. Perspectives on Harlem itself seemed to be shaped by youth workers' larger understanding of societal problems that also related to the educational experiences of students. Harlem is not only experiencing shifts as a result of gentrification, but it is also experiencing a neoliberal transformation marked by an increase in privately run charter schools, standardization, and high-stakes testing (Apple, 2004). Because of this transformation, school choice in the city has become even more arduous. Furthermore, much of students' time in schools is spent in test preparation. For EE staff members who primarily work with students academically — Walidah, Michaela, Terry, and Belinda — their frustrations with schools deepen as they aim to get students into competitive high schools and colleges that fit students' needs.

At some point during individual interviews, focus groups, or during observations, virtually every EE youth worker I studied discussed the current climate of schools as more detrimental than helpful to Black youth. As an insider at the site, I was privy to a number of daily informal conversations between staff members. Thus, I heard these youth workers discuss a number of concerns about the New York City school system or specific problems with school personnel. It was important to understand how youth workers made sense of educational issues as their sense making influences how they shape program structure, curriculum, pedagogy, and the organization's educational message to Black youth.

For instance, Walidah Thomas, a 37-year old-Brooklyn native and former middle school English teacher, has been the director of EE's MS Division for four years. She holds an

undergraduate degree from a prestigious small liberal arts college and a Masters in Urban Education. Recently, she began an executive doctoral program at an Ivy League institution and is scheduled to finish sometime next year. Walidah spent a few years working in traditional classrooms before beginning community-based education work in Brooklyn.

As a former New York City high school student, teacher, and community educator, Walidah has extensive knowledge and critiques about educational processes and school choice in New York City. While talking about the most pressing issues facing Black youth, Walidah candidly spoke about many of the institutional and political obstacles in New York City that make the schooling process for low-income Black youth more difficult than it should be:

... I said that there is the kind of institutional issue with public education and I think education as a system in general that kinda put our children – children of color – at a disadvantage. Whether it's the quality of teachers in the classroom or resource allocation or just the light in which young people are presented and dealt with in the schools.

“Institutional issues with[in] public education” seemed to be a common concern among all youth workers who oversaw EE’s programming divisions or among those who had been a part of EE for several years. Because of the nature of their positions and their tenure with the program, they each have stories or “run-ins” with schools. Again, the current focus of education policy makers on privatization and test preparation within public education was the major concern for EE staff. As a result of this context of privatization and high-stakes testing within public education, EE youth workers said they felt students were missing meaningful educational opportunities that would make them better rounded and ultimately successful in life. This culture of privatization and high-stakes testing has been discussed as a major problem in school districts throughout the nation. However, the New York City public school system in particular evokes a sense of fear and unhealthy competition through high-stakes testing. This



emphasis on narrow measures of student achievement and value ultimately constrains school choice for those students who do not perform well on those narrow measures – thus shaping their potential for attending college and going on to fruitful careers.

**Getting into a “Good” NYC high school: Easier said than done.** Few educational experiences are more frightening and stressful than New York City’s high school “choice” process. Students across the City – of all racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds feel the pressure of this highly competitive race for seats in the top high schools. For students with the family background characteristics that EE students have, the process is even more daunting.

For the EE youth workers who guide middle school students, race and social class were their primary concerns in terms of articulating the challenges EE students face in navigating the high school selection process. More specifically, Walidah and Michaela, the director and assistant director of the MS Division, respectively, saw that access to resources and knowledge about the selection process largely relied on parents’ social capital and awareness of how the system operates, time, and money. Because the system is difficult to comprehend and overwhelming to manage, Walidah explained that EE parents do not always have the access or resources to navigate this process:

...the idea that there is a gatekeeper around the schools that can be academically rigorous enough to get you into and able to succeed in college. There’s a gatekeeper around that process so [EE] is working to kind of get around that gatekeeper, not only the academic opportunity, but the knowledge of the system and how it works so that they can then try to deal with it – subvert it.

Walidah’s use of the term “gatekeeper” is fitting as it shows the barriers that students must navigate for a chance to attend a high school with a strong record of sending students to four-year colleges. Further, the high school selection process, which factors in test scores, grades,

attendance records and sometimes an interview or audition, reflects a set of complicated tasks that students and families must complete. For Black and Latino youth who are low income, these processes are not always transparent; EE youth workers thus intervene and try to help manage this process for students and their families.

At the same time, resources are allocated differently across New York City school zones, which more often than not leave low-income students and families of color in schools that are under-resourced. Most EE students reside in neighborhoods with zoned schools that do not have great track records of helping students apply to four-year colleges and that often lack basic resources. Therefore, students must apply to selective “screened” or “specialized” high schools, which often have complicated application processes.

Walidah and Michaela provide a list of possible schools for students and families based on student’s interests, grades, and test history. According to Walidah, the so-called “specialized high schools” – some of the most coveted and selective schools in the city – use exams, while the selective “screened” high schools use interviews, grades, test scores, attendance records and a lottery system. While this process is a challenge for all students at this stage in New York City schools, EE youth workers felt like Black, Latino, and poor students lack the necessary resources and social capital to effectively complete this transition process without the assistance of EE:

I mean we actually had to stop last year... I think we might have had four students get into specialized high schools and on top of that we had about twelve kids that didn’t get matched at all, any school. Not even regular round schools. And these weren’t kids that had suspect grades. These were kids that had 85 and 90 averages in some cases, not getting matched. Again, the process of matching is flawed. And so they’re like, “I don’t understand, I have done everything the school tells me to do, I get good grades, they tell me to show in class, they tell me to take the exam, I did all of that and no school accepted me. Why is that?” How do you tell a child, “well there is a politic at play,” and that they can understand that independent of, “Am I not good enough to get into a high school?”

As Walidah explained, EE students begin to question whether they are “good enough” to get into some high schools even though they may have great grades and high test scores. EE requires that students at least apply to one of the city’s competitive high schools. Attending more competitive high schools places students in a better position to attend a four-year college or university – the crux of EE’s mission. Their request that students apply to competitive high schools positions the students to apply to the country’s most competitive colleges and universities.

Michaela, a 29-year-old Bronx native born to Puerto Rican and Dominican parents, serves as the Assistant Director of the MS Division and reports to Walidah. She attended an elite private high school in New York on a scholarship and was appalled by the city’s confusing and defeating public high school selection process. Michaela discusses how this selection process affects the students and families she advises:

... the high school process itself is so difficult, that unless you have someone whose working one-on-one with the family, it’s just too hard ... our families are always grateful that we’re willing to spend as much time as we need to with them to the best of our ability, because everything changes every year... I think the criteria to get in to some high schools is sort of not fair to our students. You know, when you have a specialized high school test that’s the only criteria for getting into the top seven schools in the City, and our kids don’t, you know we prepare them as much as possible, but some of these [affluent] kids are getting tutoring every day of the week. You know, how can our kids compare to that? But even when it’s like, a [screened] school that’s in a really great district – and our kids don’t live in that district – that’s a challenge.

Michaela’s comments reflect the difficulty in navigating the high school selection process, as well as the resource inequality between low-income and more affluent students who are able to pay for tutors to prepare for school entry exams. Michaela’s point about some students’ families not having the economic means to provide tutoring for high school exams is salient; the vast majority of EE students cannot compete with wealthier students who can afford these services

as they apply to selective high schools. Although the support and step-by-step sharing of information that EE youth workers provide about this process to students and their families is vital, it still proves to be extremely emotionally taxing for students and their families because of the cultural and class barriers within this process.

EE's role as a resource for students is critical as they navigate a difficult politically charged school choice process. This is significant as part of EE's mission is to provide better opportunities for youth to be competitive in high school so that they will be able to attend competitive colleges.

**“Since when does the test dictate the curriculum?”** In addition to the arduous school choice process in New York City, students are also being inundated with high-stakes testing, which is a result of neoliberal agendas fueling education at the moment. According to scholars like Michael Apple (1996/2004), Henry Giroux (2004), and Pauline Lipman (2011), neoliberal agendas for education have resulted in school privatization, where testing has become the sole standard by which students and teachers are evaluated. Further, this neoliberal landscape supports the creation of privately run charter schools to replace schools that have been deemed as failing (Mora & Christianakis, 2011). Prior to my research, I made the assumption that community-based programs were somehow shielded from most of the neoliberal realities; however, I discovered that community organizations are indeed affected by this political context in ways that make carrying out the full range of their work stressful and at times, impossible. Many students at EE and around the nation are increasingly facing limited course options, as many schools are aligning courses with state exam schedules.

As Michaela explains, this proved to be a huge barrier for youth workers at EE:

I also don't think our kids get the services they always need or they don't get the support from their teachers. Like, I don't know where that happens or why that

happens, but some students — for example, we have a 7th grader who this whole year will not take social studies. But she needs social studies in order to get into high schools, so figuring out why that's the case — I'll never figure it out.

Michaela's frustration about the course offerings available to some students in the program — which ultimately affects their ability to compete with other students applying to selective high schools — is a consequence of the intensifying neoliberal state of education.

Dr. Leah Davis, EE's executive director, echoes Michaela's frustration with the school systems' curriculum being dictated by neoliberal agendas and a hyper-focus on test preparation. The exclusion of courses can ultimately limit the options that middle school students may have later as they apply to selective high schools and colleges. As a native New Yorker and public school attendee, Leah explained that many schools are only teaching two subjects at a time because the content of these classes corresponds with the state test schedule. "I mean they offer science and social studies in the 4th and 8th grade, because those are the years they test."

Leah went on to say, "But it's just like, since when does the test dictate the curriculum? Since when do the bubbles tell us what our kids really need to know?" Belinda Arrington, EE's high school and alumni coordinator, also shared a strong critique of neoliberalism and its impact on schools and students. She explains that with high-stakes testing, the "emphasis is more so on increasing numbers rather than developing the student holistically or as a whole person." Even the development director, Patrick Denny, rhetorically asked, "Why do they only teach Math and English? Because that's all they get paid for." Patrick, Belinda, and Leah have very different roles at Educational Excellence — yet each of them share the same understanding of the current neoliberal context of education and its negative consequences for students.

Additionally, through my own interactions with and observations of students in the program I saw the ways in which the climate of hyper-testing sometimes affects students'

availability to attend EE programming, because they are sometimes held after-school for additional test preparation. While youth workers and EE as an organization have deep concerns about the ways in which Black youth are educated, and, in particular, the ways in which students are being evaluated by tests and not provided with the subjects they need to transition to high school and ultimately college, EE still selects students through their admissions process based on some of the same criteria for which they criticize schools.

### **The Forgotten Middle Or Selective Selection?**

Because there is often a wealth of resources provided to students who are at the top of their classes, and reportedly places of support and resources provided for students not performing well, Educational Excellence is famous for recruiting students who are “in the middle” of the achievement spectrum. This not only taps into a population of students who may not be provided adequate attention and services, but it is also donor friendly according to Patrick Denny, EE’s development director. Because funders are always looking for something “new” and different, EE’s focus on students in the middle sets it apart from other organizations in Harlem and New York City. For instance, this difference garners EE media attention and recognition because of their success rates of getting students, in the middle, through high school and college. It provides the kind of success story that private donors and foundations crave. And yet, I found that EE’s framing of students “in the middle” is often compromised by their actual admissions requirements, which requires that students have high test scores and high grades. Ironically enough, these requirements, much like the larger educational system and its onerous high school choice process that EE youth workers renounce, tend to reinforce the legitimacy of that very competitive test-taking system. The majority of youth workers did not acknowledge this reinforcement and contradiction; only two youth workers mentioned their desire for EE to serve

all students at varying academic levels. EE's admissions requirements mirrors school policies that reinforce hyper-testing and the rigidity that has become characteristic of schools due to neoliberal influence in education. The students that EE chooses to serve are often presented differently in public appearances.

### **“We Serve The Forgotten Middle:” EE’s Selection of Students**

Leah Davis sometimes appears on television news programs and on radio shows where she discusses EE's mission and accomplishments. While speaking to reporters, she often explains that the program targets students who are in the “forgotten middle.” In other words, the program claims not to actively seek students at the top of their classes, and at the same time they do not seek students who are performing the worst either. Instead, they target students who are in the middle, students who, without the proper resources or support, could slip through the school system's cracks. Often in program literature disseminated to donors, potential funders, or the larger community, EE frames students as “high potential” and in the “forgotten middle.” High potential is indeed aligned with the idea of the “forgotten middle” yet “high performing,” another term used to describe EE students and potential students, does not denote the same acceptance of those students who are a part of “the forgotten middle.”

**“Not [EE] ready:” Recruitment and admissions.** Ms. Allan, EE's director of admissions and recruitment, began as a volunteer, setting up opportunities for recruitment at schools, libraries, and at local community meetings. She was then hired through a temporary grant and eventually became a permanent staff member. Ms. Allan, a Black woman with Bajan ancestry, has worked in public schools as a librarian. She is now retired but took the job working with Educational Excellence because it was located in Harlem, where she already had relationships with many schools and community groups. She is also the eldest member of the

staff and the mother of Leah Davis, EE's executive director. Prior to Ms. Allan's arrival, Dr. Davenport and Terry conducted parent and student interviews to select students for the program because of their role as division directors. But for the last five years, Ms. Allan has solely conducted interviews for admission into the program. Ms. Allan was given this responsibility in order to alleviate the director's stressful workload.

Interested students can go through the admissions process between their 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade years. Currently, the process consists of an interest meeting with Ms. Allan, a parent interview, a student interview and essay about the student's desire to attend college, and a review of their grades and scores on Regent's Exams. According to the organization's interest form and application, students who apply to the program must have 'no less than an 80/B average in core subjects (Math, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies, and History)' on report cards. They also must have a minimum of a '3 or 4 on the Regents Exams.' Students must also be committed to applying to competitive public high schools in New York City. Youth workers expressed great frustration in the ways in which school curricula is designed to coincide with standardized testing. Even more infuriating were youth workers' descriptions of youth taking only two subjects at a time because it corresponds to what's on state exams. Making sense of youth worker's opposition to the hyper-testing culture in schools was difficult, because youth workers that have the most interaction with youth—including the middle school and high school academic staff, admissions director, and the executive directors — were all extremely critical of high-stakes testing because of its stifling impact on student's critical inquiry, their eligibility requirements rest on these same practices.

When asked about the eligibility requirements, youth workers fell back to their desire to work with students, who are motivated and want to attend college, but may or may not have the



resources and tools to make it there. At the same time, youth workers and EE literature frame students as high performing and high potential. These two labels do not exactly mean the same thing. It is evident that a contradiction exists. Yet, only two youth workers acknowledged this contradiction during interviews, but it still remains because of the reputation EE has to uphold.

Ms. Allan expressed that EE tries to “filter out” those who are looking for another service or are academically ineligible for the program. EE requires a commitment from students and their families to continue in the program through completion of college, and therefore, students are not allowed to only participate in summer programs. Interested students are only considered “eligible” if they meet these requirements and do not have extreme mental health or emotional needs. EE will also refer students to other programs if they have severe emotional or mental health needs that surpass the abilities of the counseling staff. Those students who fall well below the B average the program requires, who, for example, might be failing most of their classes, are either permanently dismissed or suspended until they improve.

Comments were often made about “referring students to other programs,” but I would rarely hear of specific programs that had at least an informal relationship with EE. This changed towards the end of my data collection period when 8<sup>th</sup> grader Alana failed every single class while experiencing a tumultuous home life. Five female staff members came together to devise an intervention plan for Alana. I, along with Dr. Davenport, Walidah, Monica, and Janelle, a 25-year-old African-American administrative coordinator who supervised Alana as a volunteer for several months, met to devise a plan for the student.

It was decided that as an organization, EE had done all it could for Alana and was actually doing a disservice to the student because she needed more than EE could offer. Monica decided that suspending the student and referring her to a program like The Door, a

comprehensive youth development organization that has more financial support and staff, would be better for her in the long run. While The Door does provide opportunities for students to work towards college and career goals, it is not a college-completion program. They function more as a site with a range of resources for young people to have an outlet, obtain academic support, and receive career guidance. While EE does similar work as The Door, EE's donor and board support solely rest on the ability of the program to say "100% of students graduate from high school and 95% graduate from college within five years or less." In short, The Door welcomes students at all academic levels, and it was decided that Alana could be better supported there than at EE. Later in the semester, Alana's mother decided that her best option was to attending boarding school away from the city for high school. Because of this decision, after a brief suspension, Alana was allowed to finish middle school with the EE program.

When students fall below the grade average that EE staff holds as the eligibility standard for the program, youth workers get nervous. The majority of funding rests on EE students excelling in core academic subjects and completing four-year colleges. When students like Alana don't meet the mark, the issue of "messaging up numbers" becomes a serious concern for youth workers. Fear of "messaging up numbers" surfaced on a few occasions in staff meetings and informal conversations with youth workers during discussions about students. Because Educational Excellence has such great statistics of students graduating from high school and attending college, it is disappointing for youth workers when their track record is compromised. However, it is also alarming to know that their track record supports and sustains neoliberal agendas, because as an organization, EE has a nuanced structural critique of the processes that shape the schooling experiences of Black youth in harmful and complex ways.

Although in Alana's case, there was a referral to another program that may be better suited for her, this result may seem harsh for some because of EE's community-based setting and their mission of supporting students in middle school through college completion. Though someone could argue that EE's solution to refer Alana to another program was in the interest of the organization (to maintain its status), the culture of the organization around academic rigor (based on test scores and high grades) does not always allow students to make many mistakes academically. I asked Ms. Allan if there were ever exceptions made for students who wanted to enter the program who had less than an 80 average, she replied:

If a student tests at grade level and that comes out in the interview, and they drop in one class, we try to hear the story. But if we stick with trying to hear that story too many times, then we don't have the population that we're seeking. We might make an occasional exception but the other side of the picture, of course, is the board of directors. They do not want to see a [EE] filled with students that have grades in the 70's.

In Ms. Allan's comments, she refers to "we" as the organization trying to hear explanations for students' low grades, yet no other staff member admits students. On rare occasions, only if there is a student who is on the border of the admissions criteria or has some identified emotional need EE may not be able to work with, are directors asked to weigh in. Otherwise, the students Ms. Allan interviews and accepts show up without challenge for programming after-school.

Ms. Allan also explained that if students have a bad semester or even a bad year, "they are given time" to improve, but "they can't stay and keep going lower and lower." This seemed to be consistent among youth workers interviewed. EE gives students time to improve — typically a marking period or a semester — and also provides the emotional support to a student if needed. Ms. Allan's point about what the board desires is a significant one. As discussed above, much of the support for the organization centers on donors who want to support "motivated" Black and Latino students from low-income neighborhoods to achieve academically

and obtain a college degree. If there is a threat to these goals and they are not accomplished, then youth workers feel like EE's mission is compromised.

EE's board, a mixture of educators and corporate managers, is in charge of making sure the organization is in good financial standing, raising donor support, and making sure EE achieves its mission. If student's grades and test scores are not high enough, it limits the donors who want to give to students who are succeeding academically and are college bound.

As a result of this context, although EE youth workers share a powerful critique of schools and are clearly dissatisfied with the direction schools are headed, they cannot escape the powerful impact the testing system has had on public education and the fate of the students they want to help. Thus, while EE strives to challenge this climate of testing and its narrow measure of student achievement and intelligence by providing Black youth with opportunities to critically think about the world around them, at the same time they have a part in reinforcing a burdensome climate of hyper-testing for students in their program. Students who are admitted into the EE program must meet the organization's standard of holding high test scores.

**“Working with young people who are college bound:” Choosing students.** The framing of EE's students as those who are in the “forgotten middle” provides the organization with the ability to set itself apart from other organizations that serve students at the top of their classes and from those that serve students at the bottom of their classes. Certainly, working with “motivated” students is not necessarily unchallenging considering the various political and social constraints impacting student's educational and social experiences — however, it does provide organizations like EE with the ability to choose the type of student they want in their program. Some youth workers specifically came to EE in order to work with students who may be somewhat struggling, but overall academically motivated. Terry, a 38-year-old trained lawyer

who spent several years as a probation officer and working with youth in the juvenile system, wanted to work with students who desired college but may not have the tools and resources to make it there. He explains:

I was initially interested in [EE] and the reason I liked the organization was because they were working with young people that are college bound. It's like I don't want to have to convince someone. I want to work with someone who wants it, but I also don't want to work with a prep for prep type kid who you just have to point the direction and they're gonna run and find a way. I like actually being able to help a young person, so someone who wants it, but may not know how to get there or is fighting to actually get there. That's what I liked about the program.

Youth workers jokingly note that Terry often has conservative perspectives about Black youth, their educational experiences, culture, and behavior. In the quote above, we see Terry speaking to the claim that EE serves students who are in the middle, those who can actually benefit from the services provided by the program. It is not uncommon for youth workers to be frustrated with students who are not taking school, life, or the program's advice seriously. Omari also explained that he "wants to help students who want to be helped." Although these attitudes are reflected among many youth workers in non-profit education agencies, not all youth workers at EE are comfortable turning away students who are in need of the program's services and genuinely want to be a part of the organization. Janelle, for example, who was unaware that EE sought students who were "in the middle," shared during her interview that she wished the program could serve all students who wanted the help:

I liked that [EE] worked with high potential youth. I was one of those kids growing up... but I didn't have a whole lot of outlets in which to like be enriched, if you will. So I like that it was like, 'oh, okay, we're here. We're taking all these kids that have this potential to do other bigger things and whatnot and whatnot.' And yeah, ideologically I had some issues with that because I think that everybody should have the chance. But I understood where the – understanding was like you need to be able to hit our high achieving students so that they can continue to excel because they're not – they're probably not getting it in the classroom.

Both Terry and Janelle highlight a tension about whom EE claims to serve and whom they actually serve. Denying some students entry into a support space based on their grades — and test scores to a program that provides academic help — is a difficult quandary facing youth workers and the organization as a whole. While it seems that participants were sensitive to the various struggles young people had within the community they serve, especially among Black students, serving students academically “in the middle” to help them complete college is the purpose of the organization. Many newer staff members were not aware of this effort to recruit students in the middle. Camille, a counseling coordinator, and Simone, the organization’s human resource employee and bookkeeper, were unaware that the program claimed this in its public appearances.

#### **“And That’s Not Learnin[g]:” Conflicting Messages about Testing**

As a result of the low standards set forth by schools and a climate of high-stakes testing and privatization, an environment of stymied critical thinking and creativity continues to flourish. While observing a professional development workshop for staff members about training instructors to understand multiple literacies, the staff began a conversation about how schools fail to tap into critical thinking and multiple modes of learning due to the current test-taking climate.

While discussing the test-taking culture of schools, Akil, a 40-year-old Black male, trained social worker, and South Bronx native, who was hired temporarily to pilot a college preparatory curriculum in two middle schools in the city, explained that EE does not have to operate in an environment that is hyper-focused on test scores:

You don’t have to deal with a lot of the politics because you’re not teachin’ them through test. You teach them academic rigor. You teach them how to think critically. You teach them how to analyze information, not regurgitate information... Most of all, these classes don’t teach them how to think, which is now a foreign

concept in education: how to really think. And, I think the school system is so much on [the] No Child Left Behind Act, you want a kid to regurgitate information...and that's not learnin'... they can't do that when they get to college.

Akil's claim that EE does not "have to deal with a lot of the politics" because the organization does not "[teach] them through the test" is not necessarily true based on my observation and review of organizational literature. In fact, youth participants in EE are admitted to the organization based on a number of factors, which include their scores on standardized state exams. Grades, student motivation, parent and student commitment, and interviews are also important factors for admission communicated to me by the admissions director and numerous staff members. What is interesting about this finding is the deep critique that youth workers hold about high-stakes testing, its inherent unfairness, and its limiting impact on students' critical thinking.

Yet testing is a major indicator of student eligibility, acceptance, and success within EE. Omari, a 28-year-old Brooklyn native, served as a program coordinator for the high school division for six months before being let go. During our interview, he spent a great deal of time discussing the impact he sees on students as a result of having schools that are solely focused on testing. He states, "so what that creates is a malaise where kids don't have inquiry, they don't have the ability to think critically. They don't have the ability to ask a lot of questions because you're teaching them for this test because it's critical to their success." Omari continues and makes a connection between the testing climate that schools are experiencing due to the lack of motivation that both students and teachers have:

And I think it goes to one of the roots of the issue is that many of these kids aren't being given the proper education or the proper support at schools because of the nature of what the public education system or the education system in America in general has become. It's become you know "can you pass this test?" There's no room for creativity. No room for an outlet, barely any room for arts or PE. I think

that kids need to juxtaposition their academic development, so you get these kids in class and A) they're bored B) there's no motivation from the teachers because the teachers are teaching to a curriculum and C) everyone around them is feeling the same way. And that's indicative of not only inner city schools in New York that's indicative of public schools and even some private schools in general. I mean the anti-intellectualism that is becoming so increasingly obvious in America is filtering down to a really really young age.

The lack of critical questioning that occurs in schools as a result of the high-stakes-testing climate stifles inquiry and thus true educational possibilities and freedom. As Paulo Freire (1970) describes, “any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence” (p. 85). This act of violence not only stifles inquiry but also creativity, and strips away curiosity and a desire to learn. Leah exclaimed, “It’s just like, your sense – your internal sense, your innate sense of curiosity has no bearing on the education you get from k through 12th. That’s crazy! So after while you don’t give a damn!”

This seemingly glaring contradiction in the program structure did not come up often for youth workers during our interviews. Only two youth workers discussed their initial disappointment with EE not being “able to serve everyone” as explained by Janelle, the administrative coordinator for the organization, and Camille, the counseling coordinator for EE. Thus, my role as a participant observer at Educational Excellence, provided me with opportunities to really capture youth workers’ feelings that did not always surface during our individual interviews.

EE considers itself to be an “asset rich” organization – meaning that the program views young people as already possessing talents and gifts that only need to be enhanced. In other words, EE and youth workers have (and are expected to have) the belief that Black youth are capable of achieving academic success and only need guidance, support, and high expectations in order for them to succeed. This kind of public framing of an “asset rich” approach to youth



work is in stark contrast to not only how schools frame and imagine Black youth, but many other community-based organizations as well. This knowledge of EE has important implications for youth workers and instructors hired for the program. Youth workers at EE are intentional about who they hire. They not only want youth workers who have great credentials and experience working with you, but they must also share the organization's "asset-rich" philosophy. While youth workers search for adults that share in their positive imagining of Black youth, they also seek people who are able to counter the mundane rigidity of test-taking culture within EE's after-school courses. And, most importantly, EE staff members seek to hire those who are not coming with a mission to "save" students.

#### **"We're Not Saving Anybody:" Hiring EE Staff and Youth Workers**

Staff members at Educational Excellence make a concerted effort to hire part-time instructors who understand *and* share the organizations' framing of EE students from an asset rich approach. For the youth workers and instructors who join EE that have a narrow and limited imagining of Black youth, their tenure in the program is short lived. Youth workers who have been with EE for several years were the most adamant and vocal about who is hired to work for the program in any capacity. Throughout my research, it became evident that youth workers at EE make no qualms about their high expectations for potential hires with regard to how they imagine the possibilities for Black youth. Youth workers pay close attention to the language potential hires use to describe young people and their approaches for engaging students. Within youth work in urban community-based spaces, students are often engaged from the belief that they are "at risk" and in need of "saving" or "fixing." EE insistently rejects this kind of framing and imaging of Black youth and look for "possibility, hope, and high expectations" in language,

as described by Monica. With “asset rich” rhetoric, there is less room for language that presents Black youth as helpless and in need of a savior.

**“That’s not the right attitude.”** A common belief among youth workers interviewed was that potential hires – whether they be part time instructors for after-school courses or full time permanent staff members – must not have a “savior complex” describes Monica. Conversation about this attitude in community-based youth work often came up during lunchtime between staff members. As Alexandria explains, “we don’t necessarily want the folks who want to come in and save the children you know.” Comments in this vein about “saving” Black youth were a huge red flag for youth workers. Rachel, a 24-year-old White woman from suburban New Jersey, was hired temporarily to recruit volunteers for EE events and mentoring opportunities. During one of her interviews with a potential volunteer, Rachel describes being put off by the interviewee’s language:

Well, like he was referring to himself as kind of a philanthropic type of person and I don’t necessarily want to involve people who look at volunteering in that kind of sense. I want them to be able to relate to the students and not look like it’s charity or whatever.

Benjamin, a 24-year-old White male from suburban Pennsylvania, began working at EE as a volunteer coordinator alongside Rachel. He was hired as a permanent staff member, replacing Omari as the program coordinator in the high school division. Like Rachel, Benjamin also had an unsettling interview with a potential volunteer. He expounds in the comment below:

I think that attitude of “I’m here to give my gifts and to make everyone else better just by being around.” Like that’s not the right attitude at all. And I think that is usually pretty clear from conversations with people when they have that sort of attitude. I mean we really look for people who for one, no matter what background they come from, it seems like people have a real personal desire to get to know students or to just better understand the environment the students are growing up in, and at the same time offering, the guidance and the benefits of their upbringing too.

Basically, just helping students get what they need to be competitive and to succeed. I think that's the attitude we look for.

Executive staff members and youth workers across the academic and youth leadership development divisions are extremely cautious of those who want to work with EE students. Most youth workers expressed a fear that people might harbor attitudes that reflect a savior complex. In addition to steering clear of those who want to “save Black youth,” youth workers also described their frustration when potential hires use deficit language. Terms like “at risk youth” and “inner city youth” were trigger words for some youth workers.

During interviews with potential staff members or instructors, Alexandria says that she and Terry are “kind of hesitant with the folks who...will approach the position...like they're on a another level than the students they're working with.” Similarly, during my interview with Michaela, she shared her frustration when potential hires talk about wanting to help “at risk youth” during their interviews. Michaela drew a connection between terminology like “at risk” and the imagining of Black youth by larger society. “I think it's more like what's your assumption about them and how can we break that assumption about that particular way of seeing it. I don't think our youth are at-risk! I've never thought about them like that.” The presumptions that adults make about Black youth are extremely important for the youth workers at Educational Excellence. Youth workers are well aware of deficit societal framing and imagining of Black youth, and understand how educational and political discourse, as well as media fuels a particular type of imagining and understanding of Black youth. When asked about how society thinks about Black youth, Alexandria responded:

I don't think it's in a very positive way. Cuz if you look at media, there's very few positive representations of Black youth in the media, so I can't imagine society just envisioning all these Black doctors and professionals. I don't see them imagining that when they see Black youth on the subway. So yeah, unfortunately, I don't think it's a very positive look.

Alexandria's comments illuminate the connections between media and political discourse, and the ways in which it frames Black youth that helps to define the public's imagining of Black youth. Race is particularly salient – as racial stereotypes and biases are inherent in media and political discourse about Black youth and Black communities. Educational Excellence strives to interrupt this narrative by not only hiring people and creating curricula that challenge deficit narratives of Black youth. Many community-based spaces for young people discuss youth as lacking or broken and in need of fixing within these spaces.

Although EE's asset rich framing of Black youth helps to combat the deficit and low expectations set by society and schools, EE perpetuates barriers for Black youth by relying on a culture of high stakes testing that they simultaneously abhor and critique. This is not only clearly evident in EE's admissions policies for interested students, but also in the weight they give standardized test scores. For instance, I observed EE preparing students for Stanford 9 practice exams for all students in the program. Many students were forced to come to EE on their off days to take this practice exam. On some days, regular after-school programming is replaced by this exam. I overheard a number of students complaining about having to take this test ever year.

For students who spend the majority of their school days in classrooms, completing standardized tests, to come into a community-based program and do the same thing is frustrating for many. Youth workers at EE continue this practice because they want EE students to be competitive with other students in the City and around the country, in order to compete for scholarships and make them more desirable college applicants.

Navigating New York City's high school selection process, high-stakes testing, limited curricular options, low expectations, and deficit framing is a complicated mix of issues that

youth workers are charged with alleviating. Youth workers' strong critiques of the education system, and the flawed and limited nature in which society and schools imagine Black youth were apparent throughout the study. Yet, at the same time, EE utilizes some of the same limiting standards and approaches for accepting students in their program. This contradiction is part of deeper tensions experienced by many youth workers within EE. Certainly, there are many community-based youth programs that have their own set of policies and admissions criteria. This diversity is rooted in theoretical notions of community education being flexible and versatile so that youth workers can design programs for students in the way that they desire or that is needed based on their population. Programs indeed should have the freedom to include or exclude whom they want. Educational Excellence, however, purports to serve a certain type of student therefore jeopardizing their imagining of Black youth at large.

In the next section, I explore the pedagogical processes and standards youth workers hold for students in the program, and the various ways youth workers interact with and intervene in school matters on behalf of students in the program. Through observing youth worker - youth interaction, and interviewing youth workers about their academic and broader expectations for Black youth, I found that therein lies a contradiction in their framing and imaging of the Black students in the Educational Excellence program and of *other* Black students outside of the program – based on unmet cultural and behavioral expectations. Additionally, I will show the ways in which these expectations are also expected of youth workers at EE.

CHAPTER 6:  
**Triumphs and Pitfalls: The Struggle to Create a Counter Narrative of Black Youth  
Through Pedagogy and Youth Engagement**

Youth workers' attempt to reframe how Black youth are imagined in society, or as Leah puts it, to "create value for our kids and to leverage this work to change perceptions of who our kids are"—is ever present. It is apparent in how youth workers engage youth in after-school classes, how they build curricula anchored in higher expectations, their pedagogical practices that center youth voice and social awareness, and their public framing of Black youth as talented and capable scholars who are in need of enhancement within their program and not "saving" or "fixing."

While EE is indeed working to change the larger societal narrative of Black youth in urban contexts, data from this research also shows that deficit narratives persist, perhaps unconsciously, in some interactions with Black youth in the program. Admissions policies similar to that of EE, allows youth workers to cherry pick students who can help maintain their impressively high graduate rates. The program's selection process provides insight into who the organization believes it can work with and the limitations of its model. Data also show that students in the program meet all of the academic and cultural expectations required and subtly communicated by the staff.

In this chapter, I discuss how youth workers make sense of their organization's asset rich philosophy, and the ways in which this philosophy manifests throughout curriculum development, pedagogical practices, and youth worker-student engagement. I will show how their efforts are a form of resistance against the present climate and culture of low expectations set for Black students in schools and larger society. This chapter also captures the ways in which EE youth workers' relationships with student participants are instrumental in assisting students

to navigate obstacles within their schools and neighborhoods. These moments of intervention are captured in a critical lens, as some of these moments reflect a disruption of EE's high expectations that not only include academic performance, but also socio-cultural behavioral expectations for students. These cultural expectations are deeply connected to youth worker's *habitus* and reimagining of Black youth.

Additionally, I will explain how youth workers struggle to extend their asset rich imagining to *other* Black youth who are ineligible for the program. As shown throughout Chapter Five, students who are ineligible and screened out of the program are not typically imagined from the asset rich framing EE purports. In this chapter, I attempt to illuminate how EE youth workers can simultaneously design curricula, teach, and interact with students in ways that reflect positive imagining and at the same time reify deficit paradigms by excluding others or ostracizing those who do not live up to the EE's socio-cultural expectations. I end this chapter by questioning whether EE reproduces deficit narratives of Black youth through this paradox of these high academic and cultural expectations of youth and staff members and its exclusionary practices and framing of youth outside of the program.

### **Combating a Climate and Culture of Low Expectations in Schools Through Pedagogy**

At Educational Excellence, the framing of Black youth is important to how the organization presents itself in media appearances, to potential funders and youth participants and their families. The imagining of youth within EE reflects asset rich language – e.g. *scholars, college bound, etc.* can be heard throughout the space when talking to or about students. According to youth workers, this type of language acknowledges and honors the talents, gifts, and strengths that young people already possess. From EE's perspective, these attributes are only enhanced by the organization. All potential staff, instructors, and volunteers of EE are

expected to share this same imagining of young people. Additionally, “high expectations” is an EE mantra frequently heard throughout the space and written in the classrooms and hallways. Imagining students from an asset rich approach and setting high expectations for them is an intentional facet of the program’s philosophy.

As I discussed in depth in Chapter Five, during formal interviews with youth workers, each of them expressed insightful critiques of the education of the vast majority of Black students in this country. Half of the youth workers<sup>9</sup> I interviewed attended high school in one of the City’s boroughs or in suburban areas where they were one of the few Black students in school, and thus, in the process of conveying their understanding of what EE youth experience in school; many of these workers shared with me their own stories. Terry, a 38 year-old Baldwin, NY native, has served as the director of the HS Division for nine years, and Walidah, a Brooklyn native, both shared that their high school guidance counselors did not expect them to gain acceptance into prestigious colleges, despite the fact that they had the appropriate grades and test scores. They pointed to race as the primary reason behind the low expectations set for them as high school students.

Youth workers’ own interactions with the public schools across the country shaped their frustrations and critiques of the school system, and thus their understanding of EE’s work and the purpose of other supplemental community-based programs. Faith Davenport (referred to as Dr. Davenport by staff and students), an African American 47 year-old New York native and trained psychologist, has worked with EE for ten years. She provides a very bleak picture of how Black youth are experiencing education in traditional school contexts today:

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<sup>9</sup> Other youth workers grew up and attended high school in various cities throughout the country.



Well, just teachers that don't really wanna be there. Kids not really being challenged and forget about the safety or lack thereof...It's tough to just day to day go into a place where you just don't feel – forget about the safety piece- but you just don't feel like you are learning. I just had a conversation with a student yesterday, she was like school is boring and I don't like it. And the more you dig and you actually find out it's not engaging to her.

The host of issues Dr. Davenport describes – from the lack of caring on the part of teachers, to the unchallenging curriculum – are the very issues and experiences that EE tries to counter by creating a caring and supportive environment for students and making after-school classes engaging and applicable to student's lives. Even academic courses offered to help students with math and English, are designed to be engaging, fun, and relevant to students. According to Walidah, she solicits "...feedback from students. I'm asking them 'you know we're going to do a math class, you know we're going to do an English class, is there anything you might want to learn about?'" This feedback seeking occurs in both the Middle and High School Divisions. EE tries to provide students with additional support in core academic subjects – with engaging twists – and elective courses that are generally lacking in traditional school contexts, like Chinese, Storytelling, Robotics, and Art.

Terry, as the director of the HS Division, strives to ensure both academic and elective classes engage students. High school students take after-school courses in areas like marketing, psychology and law, the psychology of television, and Women's Studies to tap into critical thinking and develop important skills like writing and logic. These courses are taken alongside SAT preparation and seminars about college application, financial aid, and college transition. Despite youth workers' critique of schools over-testing students during the day, both middle and high school students at EE take courses that prepare them for major standardized tests, including Regents Exams. Although I have heard some students express their gratitude for extra preparation, most have also noted that they take a number of test prep classes in their own

schools. Test prep courses at EE also tend to have little to no engagement or student feedback – leading to incessant complaining by youth. In some cases, the academic classes are attended a lot less than the elective or Youth Leadership Development (YLD) courses, and on several occasions, students shared that YLD courses are their favorite.

In terms of the pedagogy, although the EE’s academic courses might mirror that of a traditional classroom, academic teachers are instructed by EE program directors, Terry and Walidah, to include hands-on activities, student centered discussion, and engage with the surrounding community as much as possible. In this way, the EE division directors, noted that they are trying to engage students in fun and creative classes in a manner that will make their experience at EE drastically different from what they experience in schools. For example, Walidah explains how she attempts to have students gain “exposure to things they may not have access to” and to experience traditional courses in more relevant ways so that they can be applied to the real world. She expounds on her development of a math class:

...our current, weekday math class has been math and architecture. So the skills they’ve been learning have been around scale and proportion by researching historical structures like the pyramids or the Washington monument or Big Ben, those things. They research those structures, they find out what the dimensions are and then they have to actually change those dimensions so that they can actually build a scaled model.

In addition to their effort to create a more dynamic and engaging learning environment for students, EE youth workers set high expectations for their students. In observations of staff meetings where youth workers planned summer courses, staff constantly asked each other how they can make classes engaging and most importantly, “not boring.” Walidah said that EE gives students an opportunity to be challenged in ways that school fail to do:

You know it's about giving them the opportunity to be challenged in the space, so that it's okay to challenge themselves as opposed to maybe setting low expectations. We set high expectations here and we expect them to meet those expectations. And everything that we do is built up behind that. One of the biggest social pressures that our students have to deal with is the fact that they are up against these very low expectations by their teachers individually [and] often, their schools...and then the system at large.

This narrative about Black youth throughout society and education is reflected in the ways in which they are framed in policies and discourse around education and criminality as described above. Thus, these frames largely shape the public imagining of who Black youth are and who they can become. Knowing this, a fundamental philosophy and expectation of EE staff, instructors, and volunteers, is an imagining of Black youth that contrasts these deficit larger narratives.

Any adult who teaches at Educational Excellence is expected to use language that reflects an imagining of Black youth that is disparate from larger society. EE youth workers look for after-school instructors that have passion for working with the population EE serves, but their passion cannot be about "saving" Black youth. As Leah expresses, "how we describe our kids is important," and "using less pejorative language" to describe Black students was essential for Leah and other youth workers at EE.

### **"Demystify What's Really Happening Out There:" Helping Students 'Read the World'**

There is a critical lens undergirding most of EE's curriculum throughout academic and YLD classes. The EE youth workers and after-school instructors who teach courses can be viewed as 'cultural workers' (Freire, 1979) helping youth "read the world" around them and make sense of injustices in society. Through these courses and general interaction between youth workers and students, meaningful relationships are established and nurtured throughout students' time in the program.

Youth Leadership Development courses, like Critical Media Literacy and Social Identity, address some of the social and political concerns that youth workers find the most problematic within school contexts. EE considers itself to be a college completion and youth development organization, therefore students are involved in a number of courses in middle and high school that allows them to reflect on who they are as students of color, their purpose in life, and the goals they wish to accomplish.

EE youth workers often explain to students that they want them to be engaged critical thinkers about the world around them. Monica expounds:

I think the biggest thing that we do here is demystify what's really happening out there, you know... The experience of young people either being exposed to something that they've never been exposed to or having a dialogue about something that they've never talked about before... and creates the opportunity for young people to question... I feel like that is probably the most profound thing that happens here is that there's this demystification and unpacking of everything, everything.

This unpacking that Monica describes occurs in all after-school classes when appropriate, but is most evident in the ninth grade YLD social identity curriculum. As ninth graders, students take a social identity course where they are “expos[ed] to the constructs of race, social class, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and gender” according to Dr. Davenport, the creator of this curriculum. Dr. Davenport discusses her reaction to the students’ response after the course was piloted:

I said, are we actually doing the students a disservice by not talking about these constructs and then sending them off to these predominantly white colleges...we need to be able to send them off with a firm grounding and understanding of who they are and where they come from so that once they go into these settings, they can thrive.

In this course, students examine how race and gender are socially constructed categories. As an instructor for this course, issues of intersectionality (Collins, 1998) are emphasized. Students explore, ethnicity, social class, spirituality, and sexuality and how these identities inform their

racial identity and gender. At EE, students also unpack media images in order to become more engaged critical thinkers with the media sources they interact with on a daily basis but rarely analyze.

Through EE's service learning program, youth engage in a rigorous research project on issues marginalized communities and youth face in other parts of the country and the world. Students have the opportunity to break down what they previously thought they knew about others, their communities, and social and political issues. Monica is the "brain" behind the service-learning component of EE, another critical piece to EE's curriculum. Solomon expressed that Monica "is steadily deliberate about [the service learning program] and going to places in the Diaspora." Here, Solomon is pointing to Monica's effort to ensure that EE students, who are majority Black of various ethnic backgrounds, visit places throughout the world where Black people reside – to understand their stories of resistance. Monica and other youth workers recognize that sending Black teenagers to Southern Africa, West Africa, South America, and Central America are once in a lifetime opportunities that many adults never get to experience and will build appreciation for Black cultural traditions throughout the world to inspire personal transformation. Additionally, trips are also taking to places outside of the Diaspora so that students can understand the connections they share with other youth who may not look like them, but who also have similar challenges.

Monica and Dr. Davenport, along with every youth worker, discussed the importance of unpacking and questioning everything. Terry recalled talking to a student who asked him, "Really, Mr. Terry? Do you have to analyze everything?" His response to the student was, "Yes, yes, you do." He laughed as he recalled this exchange in our interview, but it suggests that EE youth workers hold a deep understanding of the structural roadblocks set up for students in

school contexts and that to help the Black youth they serve to see this as well. Yet, it also shows the ways in which EE helps students not only see these structures, but also subvert them. It was constantly stated that part of the program's mission is to challenge students to think beyond what they previously thought was possible for themselves, their education, and futures.

The societal framing of Black youth has been defined by a number of forces that operate within schools and policies supposedly designed to support them. With regard to race, the EE youth workers I studied were very candid about the framing and teaching of Black youth in schools. From interviews and focus groups, it is evident that participants strongly believe Black youth in low-income urban contexts are not afforded the same opportunities and resources to succeed academically as their more affluent and white peers. Several youth workers stated that teachers, administrators, and education policy makers set expectations incredibly low for Black youth. As shown throughout Chapter 5, youth workers painted the image of schooling for Black youth as hostile environments, which is not only devoid of critical thinking, but also as a place that is unsafe both physically and emotionally for Black youth. Nevertheless, youth workers at EE are able to establish meaningful relationships with students and their families, and are therefore able to advocate on behalf of students who encounter major obstacles within their schools.

### **“It's the Power of Relationship:” Youth Workers as Advocates for Students in Schools**

EE Youth workers who have the most interaction with students, especially the division directors and coordinators, discussed major obstacles Black youth face in their schooling experiences. EE requires these division directors and coordinators to have intimate knowledge about students' performance in schools in order to keep track of their challenges and intervene

for support and advocacy if necessary. EE requires that students bring in their report cards and test scores.

In addition to sharing report cards and test scores with youth workers, high school students also report their college application progress with youth workers in the HS Division. At this level, students often encounter bureaucratic obstacles with college counselors in their schools. These conflicts can have devastating results on students' college decision-making process. I learned that EE staff involvement is critical when students are beginning their college application process. For example, Alexandria, a 29 year-old California native has been assisting high school seniors prepare for college and EE alum (high school graduates) for 4 years at the time of the interview. She left the organization to pursue a doctoral degree in June 2011. Belinda filled Alexandria's position a few months later. While describing her frustration with the lack of resources available in many of the schools students attend, Alexandria discussed the infuriating practice that some schools employ where students are limited in the number of colleges they can apply to:

...this is another one that drives me crazy; some guidance counselors in some schools will limit the number of colleges students will apply to, I guess because they don't feel like doing the paperwork...I'm like completely livid of these situations. I remember [student], one of these examples. So um, that girl, she can apply to anything! You know and she should! You know she's worked hard, this is her education, and she should have all the choice in the world. No, they limited her to...I think it was 6.

Alexandria went on to say that she had a similar situation with another student. In both of these instances, the guidance counselor would not release more than 6 transcripts for students. EE requires that students apply to a minimum of 10 schools. Alexandria intervened and called some of the colleges students were applying to and requested that they accept an unofficial copy of students' transcripts because of the circumstances. Fortunately, both of these students ended up

at excellent colleges, one in fact, at an Ivy League Institution. These types of constraints that students experience within their schools are often too challenging and complex to navigate without the support of adults who are able to advocate for them within the system.

On one afternoon, I observed a conversation with Dr. Davis, the executive director and a high school senior, Sierra, it became evident that the student's college guidance counselor had absolutely no sense of urgency in submitting transcripts or teacher's recommendations to the colleges. Sierra started to receive phone calls and emails from prospective colleges asking for these materials. Appalled by what she was hearing, Dr. Davis told Sierra she needed to address the counselor with her parent and also make Belinda, the high school coordinator, aware of the problem so that she "could intervene if necessary."

This is one example of many where students come to EE and complain about unfair procedures in their schools that can potentially have a life altering impact on their education. Here, it is clear that the relationship fostered between students at EE and youth workers is valuable for students and their families as they navigate complicated and sometimes, highly unfair school systems. Consistent with research literature about youth in community-based settings, meaningful and authentic relationship building between youth workers and students is essential social capital building that develops agency and empowerment within students (Ginwright, 2007/2009; McLaughlin, 2000; Woodland, et. al., 2009).

In another example, I learned that some youth workers have reoccurring struggles with students' schools regarding balancing the student's time, course requirements, and graduation requirements. Walidah and Terry, in particular as directors, have frequent battles with students' schools. On one evening, Walidah, for instance, mentioned a common struggle the program faces with students who are athletes. She says that an EE Black male student was told by his



football coach to avoid coming to EE after-school classes to receive support for college. This coach told the student that attending EE to increase grades and work towards an academic scholarship for college was a “waste of time,” according to Walidah. Instead, the coach advised the student to aim for an athletic scholarship. Walidah had multiple conversations with the coach, the student, and the student’s guardian to make sure that EE would be a priority. This is a common occurrence specifically for Black males and has been discussed by scholars who examine the ways in which schools exploit Black high school and college athletes for money and prestige (Donner, 2005/2006).

Situations like this one, in many ways convey the lack of regard for Black youth’s sense of academic identity. It also highlights the low expectations held by some school officials for the intellectual capacity of Black students. Moreover, it shows the deficit imagining of Black youth – limiting their talent and worth to only physical strength and not their intellectual strengths. In addition to youth workers intervening and addressing school officials, for students that experience personal and emotional hardships, on top of academic trials EE, youth workers step in to provide assistance in whatever way possible.

**“What can I give to help?”** When students undergo hardships in their schools or within their families, staff members mediate in whatever capacity they can. While participating and observing large program events, I would often see and hear parents express their gratitude and appreciation for the involvement of EE staff in their children’s lives. One day, around lunchtime, Destiny, a former EE youth participant in her first year of college, came to speak with Terry and Dr. Davenport. She had been attending a college in a rural Connecticut town and experienced social hardships and cultural shock. EE staff was relieved that Destiny got out of New York City for college; they were often concerned with who Destiny hung out with in Harlem and how she

presented herself. On this particular day, Destiny came to EE to seek youth worker's opinion on leaving her college and transferring to one of the privately operated for profit colleges often advertised on television and in subway cars. Destiny desperately wanted to be back in the City. EE youth workers were horrified. Four youth workers swarmed around her, and encouraged her to finish her second year and then transfer to a better institution.

Monica, whom I had interviewed earlier that same day, found me as Destiny was talking to Terry, and said, "Now, this is the power of relationship." Monica explained that Destiny's coming to EE was a testament to the EE program – the fact that she did not seek guidance from a staff member at her college or from anyone in her family. She came directly to EE to discuss her plans.

Staff interference occurs pretty often, especially with students that experience extreme academic, social, and emotional difficulties. Both Walidah and Dr. Davenport mentioned the same situation about a current ninth grade student named, Bekele, who had extreme difficulties with his principal as a middle school student. Bekele has been involved in EE since seventh grade. As a seventh grader, "the principal of the school he was attending was not particularly fond of him and did everything within his power to get him removed from the school," explained Walidah. In a separate conversation, Dr. Davenport explained that this "principal was trying to railroad many of the Black boys in the school." Due to the severity of the situation, Dr. Davis, filed to be Bekele's legal guardian so that he could receive the advocacy he needed while attending the school. (Bekele's father is a working single parent). Dr. Davis went to his parent teacher meetings and spoke with his principal and teachers extensively to ensure that Bekele was being treated fairly. He was able to graduate and attend a reputable high school in the City.

As a ninth grader, Bekele is now having major difficulties and is currently failing his courses and in danger of being held back in the ninth grade. Dr. Davenport expressed that Bekele is extremely depressed and walks around in a daze. Dr. Davenport explained that the day prior to our interview, she met with Bekele's father, his older sisters (one of which is a EE alum), and EE staff members, Monica and Terry. The meeting between EE youth workers and Bekele's family was an "all hands on deck" situation as Dr. Davenport describes:

We have a child that has been left back; this is the first time we've ever experienced that. And he's going down the same road, being left back and we're like what do we do with him? Do we just push him off? And so we just had the multi-prong approach sitting here. We had the family here. We had the academic department here. We had the vice president here. We had myself. When we came out of that meeting, we had a plan in place... So we all came together to figure out "what can I give to help?" You know, pull this child up. Or the analogy that was used in here yesterday was that he's flat lining and we're all like pumping to give him CPR, we're taking turns giving him CPR and that everybody has to chip in... Someone's going down and we just as a staff, we can't watch a child go down and watch them drown...I had two meetings like that yesterday, one with a young man and one with a young woman, where both of these kids were flat lining.

It is clear from this excerpt that youth workers attempt to do whatever is in their power to help students succeed academically, socially, or provide them with the emotional help they may need in order to function academically and socially. Upon hearing about this conversation, I was happy to know that staff members came together to provide support to Bekele. Although parts of this quote might seem rife with "savior" discourse, it was evident from my observations of the situation that youth workers wanted to create an opportunity for Bekele to experience some form of success. Therefore, youth workers gave him a volunteer job with EE, so that he could "feel a sense of purpose," as Dr. Davenport stated.

Even though the greater concern was for Bekele's emotional state, it was mentioned that his failing grades does impact the organization's "numbers." Terry, the HS Division Director, although concerned for Bekele's well being, was aware that if his grades did not turn around, the

possibility of him being held back an extra year would “[mess] up [his] numbers.” These numbers – EE’s impressive statistics of a 100% high school graduation rate and a 95% college graduation rate – could be jeopardized if a student does not matriculate to the next grade level. According to staff, an EE student has never been in danger of being held back a grade level. If EE is not able to maintain its “numbers” it can alter the organization’s private donor and foundational support that is hinged on assisting “motivated” and “college bound” students.

Youth workers, and EE as an organization, strive to create a counter space where youth analyze the world around them and partake in engaging student centered classes nested in high expectations, and even opportunities to travel abroad. This demonstrates the positive imagining of Black youth by EE youth workers who set high expectations and rigorous academic opportunities for students to become well-rounded critical scholars. Coupled with youth workers vigilance of students’ academic and emotional state, they are indeed important resources for students.

As shown through Bekele’s story, youth workers are present when students experience various difficulties within their schools, neighborhood, and home lives. While youth workers do seek to assist students during these tough times, there are instances when some youth worker’s responses to students’ mistakes or their socio-cultural expressions, are deficit and pathologizing. This is most evident in youth workers’ framing and imagining of *other* Black youth who are ineligible for EE. Additionally, this is also noticeable in the organization’s effort to ensure that EE students are culturally (visibly) distinguishable from *other* Black youth. This cultural expectation also holds true for youth workers as well. In the following section, I elaborate on how this interesting and puzzling finding is manifested in youth workers – and the ways it shapes their interaction and engagement with students and each other. I will also show how this process

is a function of youth workers' *habitus* as they interpret and ultimately embody competing and conflicting messages about Black youth from larger society – while at the same time, trying to shift these same imagining and perceptions of who Black youth are and who they can become.

### **Imagining “Other” Black Youth**

As I described in Chapter 5, EE staff take pride in serving the “forgotten middle;” yet, the requirements for program entry are based on the high grades and test scores of “high performing” students. Although other factors, such as student motivation, a strong desire to attend college, and parental support are also important to the organization, and the EE program’s success measured by program attendance, acceptances into competitive high schools, and acceptance to and completion of four year colleges within five years or less. Through researching the culture and working in the organization, I observed distinct behaviors that students *and* youth workers are expected to embody during their time in the program by senior staff members, namely Dr. Davis and Monica, and accepted by youth workers who have worked at EE for the longest length of time (Note: some of these expectations are communicated by EE’s board of directors).

These behavioral codes, norms, and styles are a part of staff expectations at EE, thusly, impacting youth worker – youth relations. The high “academic” *and* cultural expectations reflect the type of imagining of Black youth held by youth workers at EE. It is also a function of rejection of the deficit framing of Black youth. In other words, youth workers demand particular behaviors and cultural responses from students to separate them from larger societal deficit narratives of low-income urban Black youth. In doing so, youth workers present a particular framing and imagining of “other” Black youth by setting their students apart from those that are ineligible for the program. Youth worker’s attitudes towards both Destiny and Bekele is

inescapable of paradoxical deficit language, and at the same time shows youth workers' support of students – wanting to enhance and develop the strengths they already possessed despite their circumstances.

Through my research, I became increasingly aware that staff members distinguished the students in their program from “other” students that might be in the neighborhood. This was most evident when students encountered trouble in their schools, neighborhoods or within EE for things like alcohol, drug possession, violence, or pregnancy. When these situations occurred, they were compared to other youth outside the organization. Some staff members took the position that EE students were not supposed to engage in these kinds of behaviors. This issue became glaringly evident in a few incidents that occurred throughout the data collection period.

For instance, during a participant observation of a meeting between MS, HS, and YLD Divisions, I witnessed Monica, express major concern with the possibility of taking Dawn, a rising ninth grader on a summer weeklong retreat on a college campus. Dawn was suspended from her school for allegedly bringing alcohol and marijuana with intent to sell. Shocked by Dawn's story, Monica expressed her discontent with the alleged actions of the student. She was adamant about not bringing Dawn on the retreat, despite the transformative outcomes of such retreats, as this one would prepare students academically, socially, and emotionally for high school. Monica and Terry, both felt that it was a major liability to bring Dawn on the retreat, while Dr. Davenport tried to ease the tension and put things in perspective for everyone. Dr. Davenport gently reminded the staff that they took a student out of state on a service-learning trip after she had been cited by police officers for shoplifting as a ninth grader. It turned out that this trip was a major turning point for the student. By her senior year, the student was engaged in numerous leadership roles within EE, and she is now a successful college freshman. Dr.

Davenport reminded them she was also a liability for the organization, but they took a risk. During an interview, Dr. Davenport discussed this incident and explained that she is usually the voice of reason on the staff in situations such as this:

I mean I've always been the one that has kept [divisions] in check around understanding some realities and being able to work around that. And not everybody's going to be the greatest and you have to be willing to take risks... Yeah, they're going in with a scary history, you know because then it becomes about liability... All the good things can happen too, but you're not thinking about that. Think about what this might do for the young person." And if it's a serious risk then no, we can't take it. Cuz I hear that now for this upcoming class, "oh I can't take him. I'm not taking him." I'm like they're just two months into the 8th grade. "I don't care, I'm not taking them."

Here, Dr. Davenport sympathizes with her colleagues by talking about the reality of specific student behaviors being a liability – both legally and for EE's reputation. At the same time, she tries to defend the students by explaining that chances must be taken on youth in order to see their growth. Dr. Davenport's comment reflects a strong desire to not make EE students disposable to staff when they make mistakes. Youth worker's Camille and Solomon (Note: Both are staff members in the YLD Division, supervised by Dr. Davenport.) shared Dr. Davenport's perspective and suggested during interviews and informal conversations with me that EE does a disservice to students by not recognizing them as merely engaging in typical teenage behavior and underestimating the reality of their day-to-day struggles in their schools and neighborhoods.

From my observations of EE youth workers, it seemed as though students are unable to engage in "typical" teenage behavior, because of some youth workers' fear of playing into particular racial stereotypes. For instance, both Solomon and Terry discussed how this issue is a concern for the boys in EE. During a conversation one Thursday evening with Solomon, he discussed his plans to take a group of boys to play basketball the next day. The purpose of the Friday group is to build relationships, engage in community service, and establish a sense of

brotherhood. Solomon was excited and I thought it was a fabulous idea, especially given that EE's space is limited and physical movement is not usually possible. Besides, it would also give students an opportunity to bond outside of the EE space. Solomon explained that senior staff members at EE once told him that playing basketball was too "stereotypical" for Black boys. This surprised me, given that EE is a community-based program and building relationships between students and youth workers is key to the program's success. This situation also reflects some of the gendered dimensions of EE, as I was told that EE female senior staff members made these comments. Both Terry and Solomon often made strong cases for hiring more male instructors to relate to male students. They, along with a few other youth workers, shared that certain members of the staff held biases about Black males, which made their work with boys more challenging. Male staff members, Terry and Solomon try to explain the strategies and techniques for working with males in the program, as some have noticed that boys in the program can sometimes shut down when being disciplined by a female staff member.

### **"We're Not Accepting That's a Reality:" Youth Workers' Struggle to Understand Students**

Solomon, a 33-year-old Black male youth development instructor from the Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn, explained during an interview that he fears that his fellow youth workers, and EE as an organization, are becoming "irrelevant to students." Solomon came to the organization as an after-school math instructor for middle school students seven years ago. After serving as an instructor, he was invited to help develop a curriculum that would inform students in the program about Black history in New York City – and the influence on both Black and Latin American/Caribbean culture in the development of the city. He has been working in youth development for the past six years. Out of all youth workers studied, Solomon was the most critical.



Solomon expressed his doubts about the rest of the staff's understanding of the struggles students are forced to navigate in their schools and neighborhoods. As a member of the YLD Division, Solomon has intimate knowledge about students' struggles with issues of identity, family relationships, school relationships, and challenges in their neighborhoods like peer pressure from gangs and police profiling and surveillance – particularly with the male students at EE. Below, Solomon shares his frustration with other youth workers and the ways they imagine students within and outside of the program who succumb to the pressures of their social realities:

... I kind of get the feeling that our staff expect that students have the same access or upbringing...even what we know is not true, but that they're as naïve as we were coming up, or they're as ignorant to the world as we were coming up, and it seems to me that we are always shocked when something comes up that hints that our students may be like the other students, the other young people that are out there... it's almost frustrating because it's kind of like, on one hand we say that we know that the students are – like we have all this language around why our programs are important, and knowing that our students are facing these like real hard social pressures, but on the other hand, we don't accept that those social pressures are strong enough and as consistent enough to soak in for students to actually accept...

Solomon said that he felt that youth are not always going to make the right or best decisions. His feelings reflect an organizational contradiction about the larger imagining of Black youth. Solomon's frustration centers on the ways youth workers discuss EE students when they engage in behaviors youth workers deem unacceptable. This shift in the imagining of Black students by youth workers is defined by the cultural expectations established within the program space. EE student participants are expected not only to achieve and maintain stellar grades and score well on exams, but they are also expected to look a certain way.

As students approach the floor EE is located on, there is a disrobing or cultural shedding (Berry, 2006) that occurs – a shedding of identifying markers that youth workers might link EE youth with “other” youth within the surrounding Harlem neighborhood. At any time on the EE floor, students are expected to wear EE appropriate clothing, which cannot include sagging

pants, midriff tops, too tight clothing, short pants or skirts, spaghetti strapped tops, and shirts with inappropriate photographs or messages on them. For the most part, these are standard rules for most traditional school and out-of-school time settings and that most would agree is reasonable. Students and youth workers are also not allowed to wear any head coverings (with the exception of head coverings for religious observation, but cultural head wraps are not allowed). These dress codes are clearly stated in the EE employee manual and are persistently communicated to students by youth workers on a daily basis. Students can repeat these rules and standards on command. Youth workers say they want students to have respect for themselves and this is important given the ways in which Black youth are constructed and perceived in society. Be that as it may, the dress code is also present so that there are distinctions between EE students and other students on “the street” – 125th Street.

On one day, I witnessed Monica express contempt for the appearance of a Black male in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade because his hair was in Bantu knots (short braids in a knot-like style) and his pants were very baggy. Now, this student tends to sag his pants and EE desires to raise the standard for students. At the very least, according to EE youth workers, students must “have respect for themselves” and look “presentable” while in the program space. The hope is that they will begin to question their appearance even when they are not in the program space. What is interesting about these dress codes is that most of the literature written about youth experience in community-based programs suggest that youth feel comfortable being themselves in these spaces (Ginwright, 2010; McLaughlin, 2000; O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003).

The idea that youth can “come as they are” to community spaces sets them apart from traditional school settings where youth, specifically Black youth, often encounter cultural clashes with school authority figures over their style, expressions, and identities (Carter,

2005/2006/2008; O'Connor, 1997). Students who do not conform to these rules have consequences in the space; they must wear “ugly” EE pants, suspenders, and shirts or risk being banned from certain trips. This interesting tension shows how diverse community-based programs can be in philosophy, structure, culture, and the services provided to students. It also shows how challenging it can be for youth workers to guide Black youth in urban settings – as they are often unfairly criminalized because of their cultural expressions and styles while still striving to appreciate their creativity as young people.

Youth workers at EE drift between a spectrum of conservative and progressive philosophies and practices in their engagement with students. While these practices may be considered reasonable, youth workers are not always mindful and careful about not diminishing the cultural values and expressions held by youth in the program. Ironically, as a program that desires to reject the look, feel, and operation of “school” – they punish students for not conforming to their cultural standards, and thus reproduce the experiences students have in their schools (Carter, 2003).

Moreover, these cultural standards are a reflection of youth workers’ own disposition toward race, culture, and the politics of representation. It further reflects youth workers’ disposition towards other’s cultural responses to their social realities and lived experiences. This is an indication of how the *habitus* of youth workers moves beyond how they make sense of themselves, to include how their *habitus* informs how they make sense of and interact with others. This is further highlighted in what some youth workers refer to as EE’s “cultural” practices.

**“[EE] is conservative!”** Youth workers are also reprimanded when they do not comply with EE’s cultural codes. On one afternoon, I watched Monica, Dr. Davis and Dr. Davenport,

make remarks about and to Solomon because his hair was braided in cornrows. First, at separate times Monica and Dr. Davis walked by Solomon's office – where I was also present – and did a double take, glancing back at Solomon's hair. Later in the day, Dr. Davenport came by and actually said to Solomon, "I know you didn't walk up in here with cornrows" in a serious but amused tone.

Solomon said he was annoyed, but not surprised because of "how EE is." Again, here we see youth workers' applying their own logics and cultural meaning to others. Numerous young men at EE also wear cornrows, and if youth workers take issue with Solomon's hairstyle, they most certainly ascribe meaning to EE students wearing their hair in this way. Youth workers' apprehensiveness with this cultural expression is a manifestation of societal framing and imagining of Black youth. Baggy sagging pants, cornrows, tight clothing (for only young women) denote a popular image of Black youth that often surfaces in media discourse associated with pathology – and EE youth workers strive to avoid this, sometimes at the cost of harmony between youth workers.

On several occasions, other youth workers, like Walidah and Camille have said that EE can be very "conservative" and "corporate-like." Ayoka, a temporary volunteer coordinator explained how surprised she was to find out how "strict" and corporate EE can be. Walidah said that in the beginning of her time with EE, she was reprimanded several times because her locs (i.e. dreadlocks) were not "neat" enough according to her supervisor and because of the cultural head wrap she often wore. I also learned during a few interviews with directors that certain board members and the EE's founder did not want to hire Monica because her hair was locked. This desire to distinguish EE students and youth workers from others captures the complex imagining of who Black youth are and whom Black college bound students should be and look

like. These assertions about what “Black” and “youth” should look like also comes from EE’s stakeholders, many of which are represented on the Board of Directors who are largely influenced by EE’s founder.

**“We are almost undoing the progress that we made with them.”** The separation of EE students from other youth in their neighborhoods is a tension that some youth workers found problematic in how the organization imagines students in the program and how they frame those who are not. Below, Solomon discusses this tension as he explains how other staff members underestimate the power of structural forces that manifests in very real ways for youth in the program, as well as the common experiences that all teenagers endure as they come of age:

... The frustrating thing is that if we ask students how many of them are drinking, you know smoking or whatever, they would say no, even if they have considered it, tried it or whatever have you, and we really want to have a different relationship with them, but we’re not accepting that’s a reality, and so it’s frustrating because it’s like we are almost undoing the progress that we made with them, the relationship that we made because they know they can’t be honest around us for fear of rejection from us, and that we would look at them in a different light...

Solomon captured a tension that is also very relevant to how Monica and other youth workers’ viewed Dawn’s suspension from school for allegedly possessing drugs. The reality that students could fear “rejection from [the staff]” if they engage in activities the organization disapproves, in some ways seems contradictory to a program that builds relationships with students for such a long time. This fear of rejection students might feel from youth workers because of choices they make was clearly visible towards the end of my data collection period, when high school senior, Xenia, became pregnant.

EE staff members were all disappointed, as expected. Xenia had submitted several college applications (and was still very much in the process of applying). She has been a student at EE since the seventh grade; I met Xenia as a ninth grader and saw that she had made

significant personal growth throughout her time in the program. Youth workers found out when Terry recognized that Xenia's stomach was too large for a relatively thin person. When confronted, Xenia explained that she did not want to tell the staff and get kicked out of the program. To my knowledge, this is the second student who became pregnant as an active high school student in the program. Xenia, like the student before her, was told that when she starts to get bigger and more obviously pregnant, she would have to stop coming to after-school classes. She was told that she could only come on Friday afternoons (a voluntary day for students who are in extra-curricular EE programming). Youth workers did not want middle school students seeing Xenia walk down the hallways pregnant because it would send "mixed messages" to all students. Camille, Xenia's counselor, was infuriated by the remarks made about Xenia and felt like there could be another way of not "encouraging teen pregnancy" without "shaming" the student. Teachers at Xenia's school had already written her off as someone who had "ruined her life," according to Camille; and sadly, there were moments where she felt written off by EE youth workers. Solomon shared that Xenia probably had it "easier" than the previous pregnant student. He said that when another student became pregnant about four years ago, Monica would not even speak to her. Without a doubt, the response EE has toward pregnant students reveals a significant gender bias that begs the question: If a male EE student were expecting a baby, would he also be shielded from students to protect them from mixed messages they might receive?

Youth work is not easy; there are certain realities that youth workers have to come to terms with as all young people come of age and gain exposure to the world. Still, Black youth at EE are also navigating complex urban social landscapes. The reality of the social context in which EE students live and learn, is marked by particular political and social forces that create very harsh circumstances that young people experience.

**“We may not be relevant anymore.”** As students traverse through precarious neighborhoods and sometimes experience painful and hostile schooling experiences, they receive mixed messages about who they can and should be in the world. Larger framing and discourse around Black youth, shaped by political and educational discourse, is internalized, and thus embedded in their social experiences (Ginwright & James, 2002; Ginwright, 2007). In an organization like EE, Black youth receive multiple messages about what it means to be Black, young, and reside in urban contexts. (Re)imagining the socially learned dispositions and responses to our social world particularly with regards to race and youth (Bourdieu, 1983; Giddens, 1994), while trying to internalize messages of “high expectations” and asset rich discourse is not only difficult for youth, but based on this chapter’s findings, is also difficult for youth workers to master. The work of disrupting the messages Black youth receive from society (through schools, media, neighborhoods, social policies) is more difficult in light of conflicting messages communicated by youth workers within community-based spaces.

Solomon, one of four men on staff, also discussed an unexpected fear, shared by other youth workers interviewed. Solomon’s frustration with EE not understanding and accepting all that students have to navigate within their neighborhoods made him concerned that the organization would become irrelevant – as they move further and further away from addressing the struggles that students have to negotiate daily. Solomon explains:

Every year it is becoming more and more clear that we are – and this is my opinion – that we are becoming more and more disconnected from what students are actually experiencing, and I think in some ways we are becoming irrelevant, and maybe closer to their parents as an institution than we are adult mentors, and confidants that really drives our success. We’re losing that. I think those are the only things that we have that have been very successful for us. In addition to highly prioritizing excellence and scholarship and trying things that are new, regardless of what you feel you can do or not. We may not be relevant anymore.

This issue also surfaced during an interview with Terry who said, “I fear that I am aging out of this profession because as I get older, I become less in touch with or I have to do more to stay in touch with what young people are doing, living, experiencing.” This honest comment provides insight into the reflection some EE youth workers engage in as they try to understand their work with youth and better understand the students they serve. Whether or not Terry’s feeling has to do with the growing age gap between himself and students in the program, these insights provide important clues to how youth workers conceptualize the struggles that young people are experiencing, and how they are able to work through them despite their age, their racial and cultural biases, and their own understanding of the world.

### **“They Haven’t Had the Chance To Be [EE] Ready:” The Impact of “High” Socio-Cultural Expectations**

As I addressed in previous sections, youth workers’ framing and imaging of Black youth in EE became explicitly juxtaposed to how EE frames and imagines Black youth who are not participants in the program. As youth workers described students who were ineligible for EE services, at times, value judgments were made about the students and their families. This particular issue surfaced in an interesting way during a partnership with an organization that serves Black boys in Harlem. This organization served students from grades three to five. During their transition into sixth grade, it was decided that academically eligible students would enter the EE program. Orientation meetings were held for these students and their families to acclimate them into the EE program culture. On one Saturday, I along with Solomon, Dr. Davenport, and Walidah were gathered discussing how our classes that afternoon went with the addition of the new male students. Ms. Allan kept stopping by to interject comments about these students being “rough” and “not like our students.” There were judgments made about where these students “came from” and about what their families were like. I remember feeling



uncomfortable and as I tried to engage in dialogue with her, everyone else slowly disappeared from the room. I was later told that “nothing can change her mind” because she is older and very much set in her ways. I found this disconcerting as Ms. Allan recruits and admits students into the program. It was often repeated between youth workers about how much these boys needed to learn in order to fit into the EE program. Youth workers in the study casually joked about these students needing the organization’s “marinade.”

When asked to define this “marinade,” participants explained that the marinade is when students have adapted to the culture defined by the organization. This is usually displayed in student’s respect of the rules established by the organization. One of the major elements of this “marinade” is having students learn how to code switch. In reference to Black youth and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), code switching is defined as a process of “switching” between dialects, styles, and registers while shifting from less formal contexts to more formal contexts (Smith & Crozier, 1998; Rickford, 1999; Smitherman, 1977/2000). During new staff orientations, youth workers are instructed to reprimand and correct student’s language if they use AAVE. I also observed a middle school parent orientation for these specific students where Walidah explained these expectations of the program. During this meeting, the significance and real life application of code switching was thoroughly explained to parents. However, it is not clear if students understand the significance, particular younger students. Whereas, older students are often frustrated by EE’s constant language monitoring, as they often express their awareness of how to change their language in different contexts. EE youth workers, however, see this as practice for the real world.

All youth workers must also enforce holding students accountable for appropriately code switching when they are in the space or in the presence of any EE staff member. Students and

youth workers must speak Standard American English while they are in the program space. This is communicated to students and parents when they sign students up for the program; EE youth workers and after-school course instructors also reinforce this expectation. There are high expectations for respect for authority as well; students are given many opportunities to contribute to the space and classes are not teacher centered. If students are able to hone the program's cultural expectations, in addition to excelling academically and taking advantage of the service learning and youth development opportunities the program has to offer, then students are considered "ready" or appropriate for EE. During a focus group with assistant directors and coordinators from EE's academic divisions (Michaela, Alexandria, Akil, and Omari), a question surfaced about the strength of the organizations' "marinade." Youth workers were challenged when asked if the intensity of EE culture is so strong so that students eventually conform and excel, then should any student be able to join? Everyone took some time to reflect on this question. Michaela and Alexandria responded accordingly:

Michaela: ... I actually think some kids come in as a [EE student] and then they take a lot of steps back and then we see them pull through at the end or at some point which is great, fantastic. So I think that's you know a part of our culture right? So even if students take a couple of steps back, we're still gonna work with them. We're still willing to drill our – the marinade in there [laughter from group]. But I don't know if there's a – this is not a [EE student], you know?

Alexandria: Yeah I wonder, cuz it's a tough thing. You know, in order to have a strong culture, you have to have everyone on board and so if we have students here that are not on board, then that jeopardizes the culture and that's a conversation "why are you here, why do you come here?" And that's when that becomes an issue. So I don't know if someone's like right off- say we're going to recruit some of the middle schoolers that might not be [EE] ready, but if you know, they haven't had the chance to be [EE] ready. So they could, but then they also couldn't and jeopardize the culture here, so I don't know.

Based on Michaela and Alexandria's comments, it is evident that although EE tries to keep students focused and attending the program – the eligibility factors that surpass academic

qualifications, but also include cultural standards and expectations – prevent students who “haven’t had the chance to be [EE] ready” from ever being a part of the program. This tension, in particular, conveys an interesting dynamic in which youth workers seek to change the image of Black youth in broader society, but at the same time the notions they carry about Black youth – what they should be like, what they should look like, and how they speak – is deeply connected to their socially constructed disposition and understanding of the world.

The dynamics, culture and feel of the program also rest on students being able to fall in line with EE’s academic *and* cultural expectations. Jeopardizing the organization’s “culture” or “numbers” as stated by Alexandria, is a complex process that not only has implications for youth worker - youth relations, but also for EE’s reputation which is directly linked to their ability to fundraise and gain positive media attention for the program. Reputation and fundraising are important components of the organization, and are vital to the organization’s success. These two components are also critical as they both shape and define how youth workers frame, imagine, and engage with youth in the program. In the next and final findings chapter, I explore how these two factors are deeply connected to the framing and imagining of youth workers, largely defined by political and economic constraints they operate within as community-based youth workers.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**The Struggle to Frame and (Re) Imagine Black Youth in Neoliberal Times**

As noted in the previous chapter, the academic progress students make and the cultural expectations they adhere to within EE are essential to maintaining the organization's reputation and financial support. This chapter will illustrate how funding challenges impact youth workers' framing of youth in EE. The youth workers of Educational Excellence attempt to define and frame youth from an asset rich philosophy, where they focus on the talents and strengths youth already possess that need enhancement versus "fixing," the typical framing of youth work in community-based spaces.

However, as shown throughout Chapters 5 and 6, serious tensions and contradictions exist within youth workers, and thusly, throughout EE as well. These contradictions are clearly apparent in the ways youth workers frame and engage EE students who fail to conform to EE's socio-cultural expectations – in behavior or appearance – their cultural expressions are pathologized and likened to "other" Black youth outside of the organization. These contradictions also abound in the ways youth workers frame and imagine students who are deemed ineligible or "not ready" for the program.

While taking into account these tensions and contradictions, youth workers at EE still make a sincere effort to protect the framing of Black youth from deficit discourse in public appearances, program literature, and throughout their quest for funding. Throughout this chapter, I explore youth worker's efforts to maintain asset rich and positive framing of youth amid the political and economic pressures they face to do otherwise. Given these political and economic pressures, I examine the ways deficit framing is directly linked to the current neo-liberal educational market.

Within this educational market context, community-based educational spaces such as EE have financial incentives to frame Black youth as socially, culturally, and intellectually deficient in order to compete with charter schools and community programs. Despite this larger competitive context, youth workers at EE strive to resist the political and financial pressure to frame Black youth in deficit ways, in order to reimagine them within broader educational and youth development discourse. This chapter also addresses the connection between neoliberal privatization and the reinforcement of deficient framing of both Black youth and Black leaders within urban community-based educational spaces.

### **“How We Describe Our Kids Is Important:” Protecting the Framing of Black Youth Amid Funding Constraints**

Because Educational Excellence is a non-profit organization, funding depends on individual donors, grants from foundations, and private corporate sponsors. According to EE’s annual financial reports, over the last four years federal support steadily decreased from 2 percent to less than 1 percent. Financial concerns weigh heavily on Leah as the executive director and Patrick Denny, the development director. Directors, Walidah, Terry, and Dr. Davenport see and feel how budget constraints prevent them from designing curricula in the way they desire – e.g., field trips are limited, books have to be recycled, and supplies are minimal at times. Simone, EE’s accountant and human resource representative, explained just how serious the financial stress has been for the organization:

We completely rely on donations. And I’ve actually seen the ups and downs. I’ve seen the times where we couldn’t pay certain bills because the first thing we had to do was pay payroll and make sure everyone got paid. No one really knows what goes on behind the scene. Sometimes they’ll say, “oh I gave this check request and where’s the money? Did you pay it?” Sometimes they don’t even know; sometimes we don’t have it. Not so much as have it at the moment, but we are dependent upon donations. We’re dependent upon checks to *actually* come in.

Simone's comment reflects the financial struggles that countless small non-profit community-based programs are forced to endure in order to keep the doors of their program open. The financial stress causes many programs to collapse – especially given the economic downturn.

Obtaining money for non-profit community-based programs is challenging, particularly for programs serving low income Black youth (Small, Pope, & Norton, 2012). Small, Pope, & Norton's (2012) recent study suggests that charitable giving to community programs serving Black youth decreases as youth move beyond their elementary years, because of negative racial stereotypes associated with Black adolescence. According to the study, once Black youth enter their pre-teen and teenage years, they are no longer perceived as adorable children, and thus become more threatening and undeserving to donors. Being aware of this, youth workers at EE uphold the cultural standards of behavior and appearance, to ensure that EE youth look and act a certain way in EE brochures, photographs of students sent to donors, and during site visits by funders and potential funders.

Yet, another challenge for youth workers at EE is resisting the pressure to frame youth in EE as “helpless,” “broken” and in need of “fixing” – in order to secure financial support. Both Leah and Patrick know the difficulty in trying to reframe Black youth in more humanizing and holistic ways, particularly when trying to raise funds for the organization. This is due to the nature of the funding world, which is rooted in deficient narratives that present community-based programs, such as EE as messianic institutions. EE's link to the funding world is its 25-member Board of Directors, which brings together academics, lawyers, corporate executives, and members of notable foundations. The executive staff members at EE have struggled with the board, as they too have certain assumptions about Black youth.

**“If they’re such scholars, they wouldn’t need this program.”** Throughout organizational literature, including recruitment packets for families and students, and financial reports for donors, EE students are described as “high potential,” “talented,” “high achieving,” “high performing,” and “motivated.” In one pamphlet, an EE student is described as one who is ‘intelligent, hopeful, responsible, principled, resilient, and future-oriented.’

While being immersed in the space and in my conversations with youth workers, it was evident that everyone is protective of the public representation and the language used to describe students in the program. At times, Leah, Patrick, and grant writers struggle to frame Black youth outside of the common savior narrative, which is rewarded in the funding world. This tension creates conflict between the board of the directors – whose main function is to raise money for EE – and Leah and the development team, because board members do not always understand the importance of negotiating race and language in a sensitive manner. In two separate instances, youth worker’s discussed how they had to correct language in documents written by board members. While recounting a conversation with a board member, Leah explained:

So even yesterday, we’re planning an event with some of our board members and they wanted to write something about ‘inner city kids.’ It’s like we don’t use that [laughter] anymore. It has nothing to do with inner city. This is like under resourced, underserved. It’s not them, it’s something that were not doing. And we need to less pejorative language when we talk about young people.

Terms like “inner city” and “at risk” are typical signifiers and codes for race. In this quote, Leah attempts to remove inner city as a pathological frame for Black youth. Instead, she strives to shift the focus to the reality that urban communities are marginalized and underserved in order to remove the blame that Black youth often receive for the circumstances they face. Leah’s critique is important and captures the understanding of structural forces that shape the experiences of youth.

According to Patricia Douglass, an African American woman in her mid-twenties from New Jersey, who served as an assistant to the development director, Leah meticulously reads and rereads documents that describes EE student participants:

[Leah] looks at the writing that goes out. There's very few things, especially the more stakeholders that see the writing, the more chances there are that she's looked at it and approved it before it goes out. And she's looking at it not only for grammar and things like that, she hires people that can write well so that she doesn't so much have to look at that, but she's looking at it for tone. She's looking to make sure that it really conveys our students, and our approach in a most accurate way, and that it really gives the reader a sense for the life, the energy of the organization. For instance, there was some language suggested by some of our stakeholders, or let's just say someone suggested that we use the term "inner city youth"...And it was explained that we don't use the term "inner city youth," it has negative connotations.

When Patricia speaks of “stakeholders” she is referring to EE board members who are charged with ensuring that Educational Excellence is financially stable and adhering to its mission. EE avoids language that has negative connotations and that also reinforce Black youth as being broken and in need of fixing by community spaces. Further, according to Leah, not all board members share the same perspective about the youth EE serves. She said that many believe EE’s purpose is to save students from themselves, their families, and communities – a perspective that also reflects the position of EE’s founder.

It is clear among the senior staff members of EE – Leah, Monica, and Patrick that there is a concerted attempt to ensure that deficient and dehumanizing rhetoric is not used to define youth in the program. This effort came at the cost of Leah’s popularity with previous staff members during the early part of her tenure as EE’s executive director. She also encountered major challenges with board members because she wanted to use less pejorative language in describing the work of the organization and its students. During an interview, Leah described how heads of other educational non-profit programs, education policy makers, school leaders, and teachers all “give lip service for higher expectations for kids of color” but it begins and ends there.



Leah has struggled with the EE board to change the language and tone in which Black youth are discussed. Leah recalls an early encounter with board members around this issue:

I can remember a donor/board member taking issue with my referring to the students as “scholars.” They said, “Well, if they are such scholars, then they don’t need this program.” But you know I understand that language is important and the language that we used with our kids is important.

Only Leah, Patrick, and Cynthia Gladys have consistent interaction with EE board members. Because I was unable to gain access to observe a board meeting, I made sure to ask youth workers how Black youth are framed and discussed during board meetings. Ms. Gladys, EE’s Financial Advisor, took a while to respond and eventually recalled an experience where a “high up” board member made a comment about Black youth that she felt was derogatory:

... As a matter of fact, now that I think about it, someone on the board wrote a letter or something. There was some document being sent out...there was a derogatory statement in it, at least in my opinion. But, it was something like, these little poor black kids. That’s not exact, but it was something that was indicating that these kids were needy, or gosh I can’t remember what the word was, but I remember when I read it, I was offended because they don’t just have to be black to need [EE]. You could be Hispanic and need [EE] too ... if you’re poor and white you need [EE] too [laughter].

EE staff members, who work with the EE board, generally felt like members want the best for students. However, as incidents occur like the ones Ms. Gladys and Leah described, it captures Leah’s argument about people “giving lip service” to things like high expectations, but not following through. Solomon agrees with Leah. Throughout the study, Solomon consistently shared powerful critiques of not only EE, but of broader youth work with urban students. He notes that organizations that do not view young people as assets – possessing strengths and important worldviews – set “limiting expectations for youth.”

In other words, he noted, many people who work with and supposedly for Black youth talk about having high expectations for students of color, but rarely follow through. Solomon sees this lack of follow through as a result of people's limited imagining of Black youth. Indeed, language is important. And, the framing of Black youth in educational discourse even among individuals and groups that purport to help students, sets the tone and shapes the image of Black youth in the public imagination of America.

Like many other small non-profit organizations, Educational Excellence must raise money to keep their doors open for the hundreds of youth they serve. However, the funding world relies on stories that show how youth have been saved by these organizations. For example, a report in a local paper featured an EE senior and his acceptance to a reputable university. Some language in the article implied that he was somehow different than his peers in Washington Heights and Harlem. The student was presented as 'an example for his peers' to follow in his footsteps – Leah, also quoted in the article, shared this sentiment. Moreover, the article frames the student's neighborhoods, Harlem and Washington Heights, as the basis for 'his friends' not 'talk[ing] about college - or getting an education.'

These narratives of "saving" often reduce – or neglect all together – the agency of Black youth. Youth workers at Educational Excellence are forced to negotiate competing depictions and framing of Black youth in order to stay afloat financially. In the next section, I address the concerns, challenges, and acts of resistance from EE, as they strive to maintain positive framing of Black youth despite the financial pressures and rewards to do otherwise.

### **“What’s New?” The Challenge of Framing and Funding**

The funding streams for Educational Excellence mostly come from private individual donations and funding from private corporations and foundations. There is very little financial

support from the government. Less than 1 percent of EE's funding comes from the New York City Department of Education from the Commission of Youth and Families. The challenge for youth workers at EE then is to 1) find funders that want to give to an organization like EE and 2) find financial support that will allow EE control over how they spend the money they receive. This proves to be challenging because funding streams come from donors and foundations that make certain assumptions about what it means to be young, Black, and low-income.

During my interviews with Leah and Patrick, I learned that the funding world in youth development is centered on framing low-income youth of color in deficient ways and capturing narratives of triumph over the most onerous obstacles. In addition to stories that reinforce deficit narratives of Black youth and communities needing to be saved, I also learned from Patrick that there is competition among donors to fund programs that are doing "new" and innovative things:

We have been funded by everybody. But it's very – maybe it's an American thing, maybe it's a funder thing, but people like "new". What's new? So, one challenge is creating a new face for [EE]. So we have to be, still doing what we do, but somehow come across as new... put a new shine on it, a new spin.

According to Patrick, funders are looking for both "new" and innovative approaches to youth development, as well as compelling stories of triumph steeped in deficit rhetoric, because it attracts the most attention from the public and bolsters their reputations. EE has received major funding throughout its history, but putting a new spin on a 22-year-old organization can sometimes be a challenge. Leah and other EE core leadership members like Monica and Patrick challenge the rest of the staff to create innovate programs to engage young people and represent the organization in a way that will assist them in getting funding from donors despite how they might imagine Black youth. Monica highlights this common challenge many community-based programs face in negotiating organizational goals and values in light of funding needs. Below, she discusses her involvement with another youth organization in Harlem:

**Monica:** They were offered Philip Morris smoking money, and I said, “Tell Phillip Morris we will never mention you, we will never put your logo on anything. You will not be acknowledged in any way, shape or form for giving all this money. Take the freaking money!”

**Bianca:** Did they agree?

**Monica:** Oh yeah, Phillip Morris never showed up anywhere in that material. You know, I’m like, “If Donald Trump wanted to walk over here to save the Blacks, as long as we never have to talk about you, mention you in any way, shape or form, I’ll take your money.”

All youth workers interviewed said that EE has never compromised the organization’s values for the sake of funding. Ms. Gladys and Leah, have the strongest relationship with EE’s Board of Directors. When asked if EE has ever compromised its philosophy for funding needs, Ms. Gladys unequivocally said, “Absolutely not, absolutely not. In no way.”

Core leadership members often challenge the rest of the staff to create innovative strategies to engage young people and represent the organization. For instance, in the spring of 2011, Leah launched a contest in which each director and his or her team would be responsible for creating a new innovation for their respective divisions. These innovations had to include student input and would be presented to a few board members who would serve as judges. Leah described the innovation as a way for the directors of each division to capitalize on the freedom she gives them. She felt as though EE youth workers were not as creative as they could be, and she feared that they had become too comfortable with what they had already accomplished, and perhaps may not go the extra mile to create something outside of the box. “It was interesting to hear that people thought it was one more thing to do and it was actually like an essential core of why I have [them] sitting in [their positions]. Not to get comfortable,” explained Leah.

Even though youth workers do attempt to be innovative and find new ways to engage youth at EE, donors’ expectations can sometimes conflict with EE’s vision and imagining of

students. Particularly, as far as the framing of youth is concerned, Leah and the development team do not always see eye to eye with board members who approve all disseminated EE literature given to parents, donors, and students. EE literature has not always been acceptable to Leah's standards. For instance, when Leah was hired as the executive director, she was appalled by the first piece of program literature she received. She explains, "So, one of the first pieces of printed material I got from [EE]...was a picture of Latino kid and the caption said, 'If it wasn't for [EE] I'd be in jail or in a coffin.'"

Leah firmly stated that language in this vein is now prohibited in EE, but sadly it took some convincing for EE's board to shift how it marketed the organization. Patrick's understanding of the development world shows that donors (and media sources) love sensationalist stories that reinforce the same narratives that EE once celebrated as displayed on the brochure Leah received as her introduction to the organization. Patrick explains:

And I think sometimes what people are looking for, in terms of stories, is looking for a student that's been shot at, and they would have gone to prison if they didn't go to your program. But our impact is very different...even if [EE students] were living at the "poverty line" or students were in jeopardy of going to prison, having those stereotypical sort of views, and just seeing one that's been shot at, and would have gone to jail if they didn't have this intervention – it doesn't explore the full sociological range surrounding those circumstances, and it doesn't show the full breadth of that person. It doesn't show the many layers, the multiple dimensions of that person. It's just showing a particular situation, and it minimizes the human experience.

Patrick's point is crucial as it shows how the limited imagining of Black youth denies their agency and homogenizes the Black youth experience. Leah's leadership in this area, coupled with input from the staff members she has hired, helps to achieve a more humanizing and more accurate framing of Black youth in EE. There are instances when EE cannot control how private donors and outside funders frame and imagine Black youth. At times, EE has a choice to either

forgo money to protect the framing of Black youth or adapt and comply with the expectations of certain funders.

**“We always find a way to put our spin on it.”** During an interview with Walidah, she described an incident in which donors gave money with a stipulation on how the money could be spent. I happened to be working with the program at the time and remember how the staff struggled with this task. In this instance, a private donor provided a generous donation that had to be spent on “gifts” for students during the holiday season. This money could not be spent on better equipment for the organization, such as printers, a better library for students, or improving the student computer labs. Instead, youth workers were instructed to provide students and their siblings with “fun gifts so that they could enjoy their Christmases.”

During the party, prizes such as Wiis, cameras, and iPods were raffled off to students. Many staff members felt uncomfortable spending so much money on a party and these particular items, but they rationalized it by using the funding for a party as a way to further their on-going effort to build community among students, their families, and EE staff. Still, many who work in the organization believe the money could have been better spent to support EE’s programs. During a focus group interview, Michaela and Alexandria commented on this particular incident:

**Michaela:** ...I feel like even when organizations or companies or whatever are trying to give us money for something that specific...we always find a way to spin it to be like “well this is what we do, this is how we would use the money and that’s how it’s used...” I think this is like a real grey area...[laughter].

**Alexandria:** [laughter] But I do remember being a little frustrated with the donations for the gifts, and having to have this party cuz it was like, “Ohh but we need money for our busses to go somewhere...” I was just thinking that we could use this money for this and that and this. And, that goes directly to our mission, so of course you know we’ll do it, because in a way it builds community and we get all the kids here and it’s fun...so it does go towards our mission. But, it could’ve been so much better spent.

This donor continues to provide money for EE during the holidays for the same purpose: to provide ‘fun’ gifts for students. Thus, every year, EE holds a holiday party for students and their families instead of buying each student an individual gift. EE was able to “put [their] spin on it” as Omari stated during a focus group where this incident surfaced in conversation, but youth workers still struggle with the mandate that gifts be “fun” and not necessarily educational, as if ‘fun’ and ‘educational’ are mutually exclusive.

Distribution of private funding, according to Patrick, is very subjective and is not always based on organizations writing proposals to receive grants from foundations, though a lot of funding is obtained in this manner. Individual private donors, in contrast, are often very specific about how their money will be used and are sometimes very hands-on in overseeing the use of the money. Consequently, youth workers must negotiate funding matters by managing other’s framing and expectations of Black youth, which is often entrenched in notions of deficiency about the abilities of Black youth and the role that private donations from affluent – and mostly White communities – play in students’ lives. While this funding can be and often is very helpful, it is not as if these youth need to be “saved” by individuals or communities that do not acknowledge the conditions in which they live or care to nurture them in ways they need as defined by the youth workers who have intimate knowledge of their day-to-day struggles.

### **A Culture of Competition and the Neoliberal Agenda**

As I described in Chapter Five, community-based organizations and schools are forced to operate within an increased neoliberal educational market. The neoliberal climate has resulted in a shift towards privatizing segments of the social sector that were once defined as public, including the education system (Apple, 2002). As a result of this turn towards neoliberalism in education, privately run charter schools have increased while traditional schools are being closed. I learned

that funding sources for community-based youth organizations like EE, have been shaped in monumental ways as a result of the current education market which focuses on standardization – technical standards of what students should know, almost solely measured by high stakes testing, and accountability – which advocates holding teachers accountable for their student’s performance measured by their test scores (Lipman, 2011; Sleeter, 2008).

As I will show next, this privatization and standardization has resulted in a hyper-focus on numbers, namely high-stakes testing and grades as the sole marker for student and teacher evaluation – during school but also after-school when EE’s programs run. This climate shapes and constrains practices within Educational Excellence in ways that youth workers are both critical of and perpetuate within EE and their work with youth.

**“Charter schools are the hot thing to invest in.”** As I learned from EE staff members, the landscape of funding in the non-profit world is defined by current neoliberal trends. The funding world is based on trends that tend to be popular solutions for education reform – even if they are not deeply investigated. As Patrick describes, “In the funding world, they really follow the leader... especially in education.” The current trend is now characterized by immense public support for charter schools. With films like *The Lottery* and *Waiting for Superman*, charter schools are highly valued and being looked to as the solution to closing the “achievement gap” between low income Black and Latina/o students and their White and more affluent counterparts. Although there is no substantial evidence that charter schools are more successful than other schools, many do provide a viable alternative for students in under resourced neighborhoods.

The focus on charter schools has taken center stage and their popularity has garnered endorsements from President Obama, celebrities, and even British royalty. Despite their wide appeal across political affiliations, charter school popularity coincides with core elements of



neoliberal ideology (Wells, Slayton, & Scott, 2002). Furthermore, highly respected charter schools are being supported by corporate (private) donors and controlled via business models by for-profit Education Management Organizations (EMO) (Miron, Urschel, Mathis, et. al., 2010). Thus, the increased popularity and endorsement of charter schools has created a fascinating predicament for community-based educational spaces with regard to financial support, in heightened neoliberal times (Apple, 2002). Leah Davis, knows first hand this challenge as she and the board of the directors struggle to raise money for EE amid ever-fiercer competition with a growing pool of charter schools for a limited pool of money:

... There are a lot of funders who traditionally funded organizations like [EE]...that will not fund us to the degree that we would like so that we can build upon best practices and build capacity, because you know charter schools are the hot thing to invest in. I mean I've seen organizations that were you know from the outside at least, that seemed to be legendary youth development organizations, over the last ten years disappear from the landscape.

This reality is a huge factor in EE's funding options to support its work. Several EE youth workers said they felt like the current trend to favor charter schools or popular small independent schools, is mostly undeserved hype. During an observation of a staff meeting, youth workers were discussing the work of Eagle Academy, a school that serves boys of color in the city that recently received \$50 million to move into a new building. Political forces in the City have made efforts to make more Eagle Academy's in other neighborhoods throughout the city.<sup>10</sup>

When this was mentioned, many EE staff members sighed and made critical remarks about the increase in the number of schools in the city without proper examination of their effectiveness. Terry noted that the Eagle Academy is "not a great school" because boys are not doing much better academically, than boys in other schools. And, later the conversation between

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<sup>10</sup> Eagle Academy I and II in New York, has inspired the creation of other Eagle Academy's in Southern California.

youth workers shifted to scathing remarks referencing the Harlem Children's Zone – as a charter school and a community-based program. Youth workers made jokes about EE being “in a promise neighborhood” and Leah replying facetiously, “and those promises have been broken.” Everyone laughed, but this exchange provides insight into the struggle that community-based youth workers face as they strive to get attention and money from donors who seem to be captivated by schools that have strong (corporate) financial backing and charter schools like Harlem Children's Zone. In my interview with Monica, she directly addresses the competition for funding and publicity among charters, and the growing privatization of education:

We're talking about public schools being taken over by charter programs. And interestingly enough that's been an interesting challenge for [EE]... There [was] the extended-day movement within the public school[s] but a lot of the charter schools are now – they're doing their college prep thing, but they also have a lot more robust programming and so it made it difficult for kids who are part of Kappa or...KIPP Star...to be a part of [EE] because they are doing their own programming...

Monica later said,

Clearly the charter school movement within the education reform movement, [is trending and] is frightening...why are charter and public schools fighting each other over the same population for space? I get this idea you want to create competition, but it's an unfair competition. I have all kinds of thoughts about why education is seen as a huge growth sector.

This competition for resources facilitated by a neoliberal climate, positions community-based programs on the periphery. While charter schools are winning the competition for funding, community-based youth programs are suffering. Educational trends in the funding world also lead to national recognition for certain school models and programs. Leah is often disappointed by all of the attention that the “zone” model receives as a result of HCZ, which is a comprehensive approach to education. HCZ consists of two charter schools that provide many out-of-school services, including dental care, and healthy meals for students. HCZ also provides a parenting program and eight community centers throughout Central Harlem (Tough, 2004).

Leah explained that many donors in the funding world now want to give their money to programs that adopt the HCZ model:

...They want to see organizations doing more of like a Harlem Children's Zone model and like saturate resources in one neighborhood. You know to me, schools are a part of the equation, and if you are not actively reallocating resources in this country to change the living circumstances of poor folk – schools can't overcome everything for our kids... You know one of my white professors...was like "you want to raise achievement levels of Black kids? Pay every black adult in America what they deserve to be paid, and commensurate with their white counterparts."

Leah notes that the growing support in the funding world for trends such as the "zone" model misses the root of the problem: fundamental inequality and allocation of resources across schools *and* neighborhoods. She argued that the playing field will not be leveled solely because more and more charter schools appear in the poorest communities with high concentrations of Black and Brown students (Holme, 2002). According to Leah, Walidah, and Terry, charter schools, like community-based educational spaces, must be studied within the context of their communities, school districts, as well as within their cultural and political condition. Some youth workers expressed their discomfort with the staunch support for charter schools and non-profits like HCZ, without the proper research and analysis of their effectiveness. Michaela shares her frustration on this issue:

So this is my point, well this isn't my point but you know, a lot of people who saw "Waiting for Superman," now think that they can speak about charter schools right because "I watched the movie, so I know," but have you actually gone to any schools, have you done research, have you looked at different – you know every school, every non profit is different. They service different students, and that's the bottom line for me...

Organizations like EE find themselves in the shadows of programs that are adopting the "zone" model, which have received federal support in President Obama's Race to the Top initiative that encourages comprehensive approaches to improving schools and communities through partnerships with community-based organizations, like Educational Excellence. Competition for

resources are also fueled by neoliberal agendas of standardization and playing the numbers game where schools and teachers are rewarded for what their numbers say – and not about what students actually learn. As an organization, EE is also rewarded for presenting impeccable statistics that highlight student’s grades and testing history to board members and potential funders.

**“It’s all about academic, academic, academic.”** Increased standardization in education has created a hyper-focus on testing or in other words – “numbers.” This climate incentivizes high test scores on standardized exams, which leaves little to no room for educators to emphasize critical thinking and creativity. Community-based educational programs have been lauded by education scholars, as spaces where youth can come, be supported academically, but learn vital social and cultural skills that help them function in the world (see Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Fashola, 2003; Ginwright, 2007/2009; McLaughlin, 2000; Woodland, 2008). For example, these spaces often involve students in after-school courses that allow them to become more socially conscious, engage in politics and activism, and develop resiliency. Although EE is both a college completion and youth development organization, there are often pressures to only focus on the college preparation and academic components of the program.

In addition to EE’s academic enrichment in core subjects, the YLD Division provides courses that focus on student’s social development through social identity, media literacy, and youth development classes. These courses are highly valued by students in the program and tend to peek the attention of interested families and potential funders, yet out of all the divisions, the YLD division is the least funded. Monica highlights the uniqueness of this component of EE’s programs:

I still don’t think that there is any program – college prep program that addresses the socio-emotional component in the way that [EE has]...Leah was very specific about

making it an education *and* youth development program, [and] that one never trumps the other...We know that you could be super-duper smart, but if you were super-duper crazy, these issues were gonna derail you from your aspirations. And so that became super important.

Virtually all youth workers interviewed expressed flattering comments about the YLD division. However, there are times when Dr. Davenport, the YLD director and her staff, feel like outsiders as their work is often unsupported by funders as EE's development team mentioned in a staff meeting – it is difficult to measure and write about things like “empowerment, maturity, or increased self esteem.” This feeling of rejection expressed by Dr. Davenport and Solomon, was further heightened during the unveiling of a new promotional video for the organization. EE partnered with a well-respected marketing company to make the promotional video more current and accurate. The new video mentioned the academic enrichment and the innovative approaches to core subjects like math, science, and English. It also mentioned the program's service learning trips where students travel across the country or abroad to engage in service and cultural exchanges with other youth. However, the video focused almost exclusively on how these programs help to get students into four-year colleges – it made no mention of student's experiences in YLD. Despite the fact that members of the YLD staff were interviewed, the promotional video never fully addressed the range of social and emotional development that occurs in the organization. This is surprising given that the social and emotional aspect of the program sets EE apart from other organizations that are more aligned with neoliberal agendas and centered on academic tutoring to improve test scores.

Dr. Davenport discussed her frustration with how the social and emotional components of the program are not recognized by funders and thus not financially supported:

I mean and I think that the organization gets stuck. I mean this just came up two days ago when, there's some proposal coming in from Citibank...and so Monica was like

‘oh youth development?’ Leah was like, ‘no disrespect Faith, but they don’t wanna do nothing with youth development. It has to be high school or middle school.’ It’s all about academic, academic, academic and once again I walk away with my tail between legs not because they – the organization doesn’t respect us, but the people outside the organization that only sees the academic component and only want to fund and appreciate that.

Dr. Davenport’s description of the organization being “stuck” is salient because EE supports the social and emotional aspects of the program, but private donors and companies want to support programs that have superb statistics and show academic success among youth of color. This reality is hard for EE youth workers to accept and work around, as they would all agree that the social and emotional development the organization provides is the key to the academic success of students. Consistent with youth development literature, community programs are instrumental in providing opportunities for young people to develop all aspects of their identity (McLaughlin, 2000; Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004). Dr. Davenport explained:

I think the struggle is that when you move outside of that, people can’t really see it and so they cheer on the successes that we’ve had with the young people, but if you take away all of this that we do, will we still have the same successes? And that’s the issue. That’s all I can say.

Benjamin supported Dr. Davenport’s perspective and discussed the impact of education policies that support this effort to improve and fund the “numbers:”

Funders and schools, and general people, you can't just legislate changes in methods and behaviors, even with No Child Left Behind, it's taken years and years for the school system to basically catch up to that. And so to completely shift the inertia of the entire national system in another direction that's not focused on these observable, testable results, such as the youth development, that's really difficult. Especially when the results are kind of soft. It's now test scores...

Meanwhile, the majority of youth workers I interviewed said that EE would probably not be nearly as successful without the YLD Division. In fact, most of them highlighted the strongest features of the program as the social and emotional development and the service learning

opportunities, because they provide youth with access to experience once in a lifetime chances to travel. While youth workers outside of the YLD division claim to understand the significance of social and emotional development of youth, I see students being pulled out of YLD classes by youth workers from other divisions. Students are rarely pulled out of their academic classes because they are deemed as being “important” to their academic success and it increases their chances of getting into college. Ironically, I witnessed students being pulled out my YLD classes to take a practice Stanford 9 test. The full range of EE’s work gets lost in the quest to appease the funders who support programs that are helping to improve the test scores and grades of low-income students of color.

There is no question that the decrease in federal funding for community organizations is a direct result on the shrinking public sector and the growing private sector’s control over the education market. Unfortunately, community organizations with strong social and emotional components to their programs may not receive the same level of attention and funding as programs that are concentrated on playing the numbers game.

Fundraising leverage is not only achieved by organizations who participate in the numbers game and base their success on the improvement of test scores and grades – but this “success” is also gained based on the personal narrative of the organizations’ leader. Throughout my research, it became evident that there is a strong connection between neoliberal shifts and funding streams centered on models that reinforce privatization, standardization, and narrow imagining of Black youth and communities. Thus, these neoliberal shifts reinforce a particular framing and imagining of urban community-based programs serving Black youth and its leaders, especially if that leader is Black. In the next section, using youth workers’ critical analysis of framing and funding from above, I share how funding is prioritized and awarded to

community-based programs whose leaders perpetuate deficient rhetoric about the youth they serve and through their own personal narratives.

### **Problematizing Deficit Framing and Imagining of Black(ness) Youth at All Levels in CBES**

Deficient narratives and imagining of Black youth can be reinforced within community-based educational spaces, especially those that are positioned as messianic saving institutions, rescuing “broken” and “at risk” youth. This framing and imagining is also reified in the framing of Black leaders of community-based programs. With the popularity of schools like Harlem Children’s Zone and Capital Preparatory Magnet School, both Geoffrey Canada and Steve Perry, have become the face of these institutions. They are the founders and leaders of these schools and receive national and international attention for their work in their communities. When I hear their stories and the work being done in their schools and programs via media sources, they are often framed in ways that EE strives to avoid. They are described as “saviors” or “heroes” to broken communities. The communities they work in are presented as desolate and godforsaken places lacking any sense of agency or hope. EE Youth workers had a strong critique of the discourse used in framing Black leaders of community-based youth programs and charter schools – as these frames tend to fuel stories that perpetuate the savior mentality. These narratives are also deeply racialized and gendered.

### **“Myth of the Super Negro:” Youth Worker’s Critique of Savior Framing in CBES**

Throughout media and political discourse, Black leaders of community-based programs and charter schools are often framed as “reformed at risk Black males” who were once in need of saving, and now that they have been saved, they can now save other Black youth. These stories are constantly perpetuated throughout political, media, and educational discourse. They reinforce perceptions about who Black youth are and the communities in which they reside. Below, is an



exchange from a focus group between Michaela and Alexandria regarding Geoffrey Canada, Harlem Children's Zone, and the charter school movement as displayed in the film, *Waiting for Superman*:

**Michaela:** And I think he's perpetuating this like idea of what Harlem is like and what the youth are like in Harlem and what's that going to mean and I don't think that's necessarily true.

**Alexandria:** And it just seems to be this national trend of that type of –

**Michaela:** Save the children.

This rhetoric of 'saving the children' was discussed often in interviews and focus groups with youth workers. During an interview, Walidah expressed her anger with the framing of Black leaders of charter schools and community-based programs. She described the framing of these leaders as "Super Negros." She elaborates in the quote below:

I think I gave the myth of the 'Super Negro' a name years ago, when I first started working in non-profits. Um, and it came to me because I just so happened to be working at an organization [with a] very charismatic leader in a lot of ways, this organization was able to do a lot, strictly on the strength of this leader's story. You know, kind of the "Black man makes it out of the ghetto; goes to prestigious universities and reaches back to help his community kind of thing." ...So everything that the organization does is kinda based on that premise, you know. It's only capable – it's only possible because this Super Negro man, this guy can come back and can reach back and save the day for all the kids he left behind when he split right.

As the leaders of community programs and charter schools are publicly recognized, the narratives of these leaders are racialized and gendered with the very same deficient rhetoric used to describe youth in their programs. In particular, Black males like Geoffrey Canada and Steve Perry have been lauded politically for their work and have gained prominence even outside of educational arenas. What is interesting about this insight is that, traditionally, White wealthy philanthropists started programs to "save" youth – hence Educational Excellence's creation. Now, we have entered a moment where the image of a Black man reaching back to save others

the way he was saved, has become *the* narrative around the creation of community support spaces for Black youth.

Walidah's comments and naming of the "Super Negro" label captures the ways in which the framing of these leaders in public discourse removes the concern away from youth themselves. Further, the attention given to the leader's story overshadows the fact that youth have been marginalized by a hegemonic and unequal society. The story of the "leader" becomes ingrained in the public's imagination about who can start and build these kinds of spaces. Walidah explained why she thought this framing was problematic and how it affects programs and students:

Because the story becomes bigger than the mission. The story becomes bigger than the mission. Or like, Superman himself was a flawed character – if you follow the comic book version of Superman. You know and all of these superheroes. If anything, at the end of the day, the intention behind a superhero is to really highlight their humanity...And I think that's the part of Superman people don't get – that he kept trying to do good. He kept trying to do better as opposed to *saving* people. His intention was just to make things okay. It wasn't just – he wasn't trying to be a hero – he was just trying to do what's right. But when you start to buy into your myth that is contaminating.

Walidah's comments are powerful in a few ways. First, they show the danger in reproducing a narrative that takes the focus off of systemic inequality that has defined by the current educational landscape. Second, such a narrative creates a formula for education reform and youth development that becomes etched in stone, as the way programs *have* to be constructed. And, lastly, program leaders who do not have the "savior narrative" as a part of their personal story go unrecognized and unacknowledged. As EE's executive director, Leah often faces this challenge in her networking with other non-profit leaders. She explained how people tend to be "disappointed" by her story because her personal narrative is unlike Geoffrey Canada's and other popular mainstream non-profit and charter school leaders:

Cuz I can't feel good about myself if you're not from the inner city (laughter). And I have had people who like want to know – not literally- but I think people are disappointed by my own story that I like didn't grow up in public housing, I didn't jump over garbage cans to get to school, and step on crack needles – you know, that's not my story. And I find that there are certain folks [pause] who are in the social sector of color, who seem to have more fundraising leverage, quite frankly when they can talk about the mean streets they grew up on.

Both Leah and Walidah's comments reflect a particular moment in education, one that is marked by deficit narratives not only about Black youth in community programs, but also about the leaders that run these programs. The public imagining of Blackness is rooted in racial stereotypes about what the Black experience is like, thusly, eliminating the opportunity for diversity in the Black experience. As a result, leaders of programs who share Leah's background do not receive the same kind of acknowledgement and financial support as those who comfortably exist in the narrow scope of society's definition and vision of Blackness.

Based on youth worker insight, another challenge present for EE is the way that deficit narratives surface about leaders of these programs or the “Super Negroes” as Walidah suggests, and the ways they are nationally recognized for *their* success. Subsequently, their models become the blueprint for how to “save” other poor youth of color in other contexts. “The whole myth can be very dangerous I think for community organizations and schools generally, because we keep looking for that silver bullet in schools,” explains Walidah. This silver bullet or one method or solution to working with low income Black youth is dangerous as it implies that all contexts and all young people are the same and will respond to the same strategies.

There is an assumption that the “Super Negro's” formula is the sole method for educating and developing young people. This assumption is often made by the “political regime in cities looking for that one answer, that one bullet,” according to Walidah. The success is displayed through the “Super Negro” leader, and therefore, the answer to the problem becomes whatever

the Super Negro did. Many community-based programs and charter schools are deemed successful because they attract major corporate sponsorship and therefore, political buy-in.

In light of President Obama's "Race to the Top" competition, which provides monetary awards for schools and community organizations for creating innovative comprehensive strategies for improving the academic experiences and outcomes for young people, I fear that organizations would enter the spotlight that are merely replicas of other programs that have not been properly analyzed for their specific contexts. Cities throughout the country are looking to replicate programs that have been deemed "successful" like HCZ's zone model, which is based in neoliberal notions of privatization and standardization. Corporate backing of these programs provide a certain label or stamp of approval that imparts a type of branding of success for these programs, where they become publicly recognized as *the* solution for education reform. Further, they reproduce a particular narrative of Black youth that imagines them as broken and in need of saving by community education programs and their Super (Negro) Heroes.

As I have shown throughout all findings chapters, though not without deep tension and contradiction, as an organization, Educational Excellence is unwavering in its claim and desire to reframe Black youth in more positive and humanizing ways in political and educational discourse. The framing of Black youth is dynamically shaped by political and media discourse; it is often negative, deficient, and perpetuates pathological perspectives on Black youth and their responses to the social and political conditions that surround their schooling experiences and lived realities. EE youth workers do a great job of dodging deficit framing when funding pressures arise. They also manage to resist the pressures to frame youth in socially, culturally, and educationally deficient ways for funding. But, they do fall short as they succumb to the pressures of the neoliberal education market, thus "academic rigor" and "accountability"

measured by test scores and high grades, overshadows powerful features of their program and work with Black youth in order to maintain their key financial supporters and reputation.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**Relocating the Deficit: (Re) Imagining Black Youth Within Social, Political, and Educational Discourse**

As community-based spaces become more recognized and praised as important places for serving marginalized communities and youth of color, they are often framed as institutions that “save” and “fix” students who are “broken” and “deficient.” Such framing disregards the assets that Black youth bring to educational spaces and ignores their agency, thereby limiting the ways they are imagined, engaged, and educated. While simultaneously serving as a youth worker and ethnographer at Educational Excellence, I had deep insight into the organizational culture and pedagogical practices of youth workers. As a result, I witnessed their success in combating widespread deficit narratives, as well as critical moments when they fell short.

This study was not intended to be an expose` – rather the purpose was to show how youth workers made sense of the social, political, and educational problems shaping the experiences of Black youth, and how that sense making informs their framing and imagining of Black youth within their program. The aim of this study was to understand how youth workers’ imagining of Black youth informs their pedagogical practices and engagement with students. First, this chapter illuminates major themes of the study and situates them in their appropriate political and theoretical context. Secondly, in this chapter I discuss the social, educational, and political significance and implications of this work and offer insights and recommendations for policy, schools, and other community-based educational spaces. And, lastly, I will address the possible directions for future study on this important topic.

*Tensions and Contradictions*

This study demonstrates how youth workers’ framing and imagining of Black youth has the power to inform and limit the cultural, social, and pedagogical practices of the organization.

Ultimately, the findings from this research are multifaceted and interconnected in important ways. Revealed in the data, are deep tensions where youth workers negotiate their discontent with the negative and narrow ways schools and society imagines Black youth, and their own perpetuation of many of the same narrow forms of imagining. Indeed, tensions and contradictions exist within the collective imagining of youth workers at Educational Excellence. At the same time, youth workers and EE as an organization attempt to provide a counter narrative to the common frame of Black youth as problems. Youth workers understood the importance of the negotiation of race in language and strive to frame Black youth in their program in more humanizing ways.

Throughout all of the themes that emerged, the most challenging revelation to make sense of was the inherent unconscious and conscious contradictions in youth workers' imagining of Black youth at large. It is difficult to make sense of how youth workers could both seek to disrupt deficient narratives of Black youth and intervene on behalf of students who are treated unfairly in schools *and at the same time*, harbor cultural pathological understandings of the youth and families they serve. Educational Excellence is both a critical counter hegemonic space, as well as one full of tensions and contradictions based on organizational philosophy and practices, and orientation to the meaning made by students' cultural responses to their social worlds.

Youth workers' disposition towards and understanding of systemic structural, political, social, and educational problems, influences the framing and imagining of Black youth in their program. Therefore, it is clear that the *habitus* of youth workers informs how they respond to others, thus, extending theorizing on *habitus* as not only being helpful in understanding how people make sense of themselves in relationship to their social world, but also how people make sense of, imagine, and respond to the social realities of others.

Consequently, youth workers at EE reify many of the same deficit narratives of Black youth based on their responses to youths' style of dress, use of language, and their politics of representation. Though similarities do exist, youth workers each come to Educational Excellence with their own experiences, biases, worldviews and understanding of social, political, and educational problems. While the organization – in certain aspects of philosophy and practice – is progressive and youth workers see structural inequality (mainly in the form of racism and concentrated poverty) shaping the lives of Black youth in urban contexts, the organization is also culturally conservative as some youth workers described, thus raising tensions and situations that are often uncomfortable for youth workers and students. It was compelling to see and feel the contradictions that operate within staff members who are dealing with the day-to-day impact of the symptoms of major structural social and political problems that impact the educational experiences and outcomes of Black youth.

#### *Youth Worker – Cultural Worker?*

EE's stated philosophical approach for working with youth is the belief that all youth are capable of learning and, that factors like, discrimination, poverty, broken schools, and society's low expectations – makes their educational experiences arduous. Between youth workers, these ideas were professed. Yet, in the very same breath, comments were made about students – both inside and outside of EE – that reflect cultural pathological undertones about the values of students and their responses to the world around them.

Youth workers at Educational Excellence held a strong structural critique of the changing climate of Harlem and of the political and social problems shaping the nature of public education today. Harlem, like other major cities in the country, is experiencing the impact of gentrification and neoliberal transformation – in which community services and schools are operated by the



private sector or with private sector values. Youth workers are centered in the middle of this shifting terrain, helping young people traverse through difficult school and neighborhood circumstances. As youth workers manage the changing context of their work, they assist students in making sense of the racial and economic changes within their communities. Through after-school classes and service learning trips, EE provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their identities and the world around them.

The role of youth workers as cultural workers is essential for young people who are living and learning in complex times. Nonetheless, youth workers are also human and operate with their own socially constructed dispositions and understandings of a highly complex world. Even still, because of the importance of “youth work,” students have greater opportunity for restoration – given their plight in schools – within community-based spaces. Youth workers, therefore, are instrumental in helping youth to “read the world around them” (Freire, 1970; Canella & Noguera, 2006). This is possible because of the nature of youth work in that students have the chance to build relationships with adults in meaningful and authentic ways (Ginwright, 2007/2009; Woodland, et. al., 2009). The relationships forged between youth workers and students are critical for low-income Black youth coming of age in complex urban environments.

### *Political Challenges*

As external political factors, such as the shifting landscape of Harlem and neoliberal transformation in education continues to shape Educational Excellence and constrain the practices of youth workers, their philosophy and framing of youth is often challenged. Due to increased privatization of education fueled by neoliberal agendas, community-based spaces like Educational Excellence have to cater to private funders that value test scores and high grades as markers of achievement. Like many other community-based spaces, Educational Excellence has

multiple dimensions that tap into the entire development of youth. Yet, because of these economic pressures, EE is forced to highlight the academic component of their program at the expense of other powerful elements of their work; these other areas – the social and emotional aspects of the program are often overshadowed by the focus on academic preparation for college.

As a result, the culture of high expectations professed by Educational Excellence is compromised by their recruitment and selection process, which favors students who not only fit into neoliberal definitions of success, but who also fall in line with EE's academic (and cultural) expectations. In many ways, youth workers are forced to narrowly define their work with youth to conform to the expectations of external political influences. Political forces are indeed real, and cause community-based programs to compete for limited money. This pressure is a common experience by all social institutions – including schools – that are bounded by political constraints, which eventually affects their practice. Many community-based spaces are being forced to ground their success in their numbers, thus reducing the flexibility traditionally experienced and valued in these settings.

The pressure to frame Black youth in deficient ways is supported by educational policy that is centered on developing programs and services to marginalized youth because of what they are perceived to be lacking. As shown in Chapter 7, rewards are given to community-based programs that are able to frame youth of color as educationally, socially, and culturally deficient. These rewards – in the form of monetary support and national recognition – help to reify negative framing and limited imagining of Black youth.

### **Putting the Deficit in its Proper Place**

As I began to conceptualize this study a few years ago, I had a conversation about the framing of the Harlem Children's Zone with a professor/youth worker I admire. I explained my

discomfort after watching an American Express commercial advertising their support for HCZ. I described the commercial in which Geoffrey Canada was literally coming out of the darkness, as he painted a picture of Harlem as the most terrifying and dangerous place where no one should ever send children. The commercial discussed everything he felt Harlem youth were lacking and why they were failing academically. Canada pointed to problems like extreme poverty and failing schools, but he also referenced poor parenting and students taking education for granted. While the professor agreed that the framing of Harlem and Black youth was problematic and promoted the “saving,” of Black youth, he also expressed his desire not to discredit anything that sought to support Black youth academically and socially.

While I thought his perspective was valid, I was still very much unsettled and bothered by the framing of Black youth in educational and political discourse. After much reflection, I remembered that I was once a high school student involved in an out-of-school time program, where deficit oriented assumptions were made about me. As a Black teenaged girl from “South Central” Los Angeles, the organization I was a part of saw me as being “saved” by their program. As this was happening to me, I was sometimes uncomfortable but didn’t understand why. Other times, I perpetuated this narrative by playing the role of the “poor broken Black girl from the hood.”

As with my own experience and the HCZ commercial, what is problematic is that the deficit and “needing to be fixed” framing of Black youth denies their agency. It diminishes the strengths and competencies that Black youth already possess and carry with them through their school and neighborhood contexts.

Some might argue that if Black youth were not framed from the deficit no one would see the need for community-based spaces; however, the deficit must be put in the appropriate place.

Indeed, community-based educational spaces are established out of a need; out of a need to supplement, compliment, and make up for what students are not receiving in traditional school contexts.

A deficit does exist; but it is not inherent within Black youth. Rather, the deficit is within social institutions that have failed Black youth; the deficit is within a school system that is inherently unequal and where the playing field is unlevelled for the most disenfranchised. The deficit is within a society that spends more money on jails than schools, thusly communicating in every way that because they are Black it is *expected* that they have limited ambition and, as James Baldwin eloquently writes, they are expected to “make peace with mediocrity.”

The need for community-based educational spaces comes out of what society and schools have deliberately failed to do for Black youth. This shift in perspective has the power to change the larger framing of Black youth often embedded in racist and cultural pathological rhetoric that undermines their strength, agency, and humanity.

This study captures the missing voices of youth workers from educational and social research who hold extensive knowledge about the challenges that youth encounter within their schools and neighborhoods. Rarely are the voices of youth workers included in broader discourse about education reform. The youth workers in this study illuminate possibilities for hope and reimagining curriculum embedded in high expectations and academic rigor that acknowledges the cultural, social, and political struggles that Black youth navigate. Vital relationships are established between youth workers and students – an important feature of many community-based spaces.

At the same time, as a result of the political climate of education at the moment – marked by neoliberal transformation, increased privatization, standardization, and hyper-focus on testing

– community-based programs are facing difficult decisions. As youth workers live in a society with competing messages about and imaginings of Black youth, there is a deep struggle to manage their own imagining of Black youth. Tensions and contradictions within youth workers evolve as they are charged with critiquing a system to which they belong. Youth workers, classroom teachers, community activists, and grassroots organizers, who care about issues of social justice and who seek to humanize marginalized youth, all must negotiate the framing of their work.

### **Implications**

This dissertation has implications for theory, schools, education policy, and other community-based organizations. Foremost, this study validates the voices and experiences of youth workers and has implications for their recognition *as* educators. Youth workers are rarely included in discourse on urban education reform. Findings from this study can encourage education (traditional and community-based) reform efforts to include the voices of youth workers. All forms of education, traditional or community-based, are laden with tensions, but youth workers hold intimate knowledge of students' experiences within schools, their families, and communities. Youth workers are able to provide the social and emotional support that young people need in order to navigate complicated school and neighborhood contexts. The strength of this network allows for youth worker advocacy on the behalf of students in strenuous circumstances that arise in their schools, neighborhoods, and families. Schools and traditional teachers can benefit from the knowledge youth workers have about students *and* their social context.

In addition to recognizing the contribution of youth workers to the educational outcomes and social development of young people, this study also centers the importance of community-

based educational spaces as viable sites of learning and possibility for Black youth. Community-based organizations serving youth populations can function as sites of resistance against hostile school environments for Black youth. Many community organizations strive to make their programs vastly different from what students experience and expect within traditional school contexts. Schools can learn immensely from youth workers and community-based spaces. As this study shows, youth workers were able to create spaces within their program that encouraged critical thinking, high expectations, self and social awareness, in addition to academic rigor. I recognize that both schools and community-based programs are under some of the same political constraints (to some degree); however, the determination to reframe Black youth within educational discourse is important to share across informal and formal educational settings.

Studies on the experiences of classroom teachers are critically important as the most formal education students receive comes from schools. The challenges, triumphs and best practices that teachers employ are indeed valuable to broader educational discourse. At the same time, adult educators within community-based spaces also play a significant role in the lives of young people. Therefore, this study has implications for the recognition of youth workers as educators who also support the academic development of youth just as traditional classroom teachers do. As shown throughout this dissertation, youth workers come to community-based educational spaces with a wide range of skills and experiences. The diversity within their experiences as traditional classroom teachers, school administrators, therapists, social workers, law enforcement workers, and academics brings a lot of richness to their curriculum development. Findings from this research can encourage greater relationship building and best practice sharing between schools and community-based educational spaces, and between youth workers and teachers more specifically.

Throughout this study, I have shown moments of tension and slight contradictions in the imagining of Black youth by EE youth workers. These tensions surfaced in their response to participant behavior as well as their attitude towards students who were deemed ineligible for the program. These tensions and sometimes contradictions in what youth workers purport to do and what they actually do can be recognized in most social organizations and institutions within or outside of education. How people think, what they say, and what they actually do is a common strain within individuals who work within institutions that are complicated by race.

This study challenges deficit and cultural pathological perspectives of Black youth within educational and political discourse. Through their work, Educational Excellence strives to do this as well. Yet, contradictions abound. Because of the nature of racism and racial stereotypes embedded within America's imagining of Black youth, they are often discussed in ways that other youth are not. In other words, their youthful "mistakes" are often criminalized and pathologized. These types of responses are not limited to those who are not a part of the Black community as the effects of racism are widespread across all communities and racial and ethnic groups.

For community-based youth workers, schools, and classroom teachers, it is important to imagine Black youth with the complexity in which we as educators attempt to understand youth in a broader sense. Within school contexts, Black youth are not often allowed to be as complex as they are without demonization from teachers and administrators. Despite the fact that many community-based programs can be characterized as sites of resistance for youth, as shown in this study they too can perpetuate deficit oriented and demonizing perspectives regarding youths' responses to the world around them. Therefore, this research can inform the thinking and practices of those who engage in community-based youth work to consider the ways in which

they might approach Black youth as they come of age in a highly racialized and unequal society, as well as ever-changing communities as seen in the gentrification and neoliberal transformation of neighborhoods like Harlem.

Findings from my study with youth workers also has implications for education policy, as community-based programs are being acknowledged in political discourse as vehicles to provide comprehensive solutions to educational problems. President Obama's Race to the Top initiative, a national competition that rewards schools and community agencies for providing comprehensive support to youth, families, and communities, was created with the Harlem Children's Zone's model in mind. Part of this initiative supports the zone model through the replication of Promise Neighborhoods.

Although I take issue with the deficit framing of HCZ in public forms and its perpetuation by its leader – the effort is admirable and important. Yet, as this study shows there are deep contradictions and tensions within community-based programs. There is a formidable danger in mass-producing replicated community-based educational spaces without proper evaluation, analysis of context, and an understanding of the imagining of youth and their context.

Considering the current privatized climate of education today, as well as the increased presence of charter schools – a function of neoliberal approaches to education reform – many community-based programs are suffering financially because the philanthropic world has shifted their focus to supporting charter school development instead of out-of-school time programs. My hope is that this research can encourage leaders of community-based youth programs and charter school developers, as some also seek to provide alternative approaches to educating students, to understand the importance of how marginalized youth and communities are discussed within larger educational and political discourse and the ways in which both



community-based, school-driven, and policy-driven initiatives can perpetuate deficit perspectives of Black youth, thereby limiting their agency and narrowing their possibilities.

Additionally, given the national focus on providing comprehensive innovations for educating youth, such as President Obama's education initiatives, policy makers and potential leaders of these initiatives should know that before programs are replicated throughout the country, greater attention must be given to the link between framing, imagining, pedagogical and organizational practices. As I have shown throughout this study, the framing and imagining of youth can inform and limit the cultural, social, and pedagogical practices of any institution, education or otherwise. If our imagining of Black youth is limited and narrow, then the services and pedagogical practices designed to support them will also be limited.

### **Future Research Directions**

The findings from this study suggest a number of future research directions. First, out-of-school time community-based educational spaces are frequently trivialized and reduced to only places for tutoring, help with homework, and test prep during after-school hours. However, there are a range of pedagogical practices and possibilities within these spaces that must be illuminated and taken seriously within education scholarship. In future work, I plan to seriously interrogate the meaning made by community-spaces and theorize the practices that occur within them. The social, academic, and political dimensions of these spaces are proliferate and nuanced– and the outcomes of these dimensions need further theorizing.

Second, the ways in which Black youth are imagined in society from deficit perspectives is highly problematic. Yet, there needs to be further discussion on the ways in which all educators and youth advocates can guide, nurture, and 'correct' young people from a place of love without viewing them as deficient or inherently a burden or problem. In future work, I plan to continue to

examine the processes that occur within community-based spaces by exploring the relationships between youth workers and young people to shed light on the strategies youth workers use to guide youth academically, socially, and emotionally through a toxic racialized society.

Thirdly, examining the experiences of youth workers was important as their voices are rarely captured in educational scholarship. Capturing the richness and nuance of youth workers' experiences adds to current scholarship about youths' experiences in/and the function of urban community-based educational spaces. Future directions would include a deeper analysis of all stakeholders of community-based programs, including youth, parents, and the program's board members.

Lastly, as displayed throughout this study, the voices of youth workers are incredibly important. Their triumphs, personal contradictions, and struggles are significant and parallel to teachers in traditional school contexts, who also have powerful stories of triumph and contradiction in their own work. Thusly, future research can explore the narratives of both youth workers and traditional classroom educators who are committed to social justice, in order to elucidate common pitfalls and best practices of educators striving to provide better educational experiences for Black youth.

Historically, change in this country has come from two places: from policies generated from the top, and from acts of resistance from grassroots community-based work in the most marginalized communities. Given this, we need community-based work *and* changes in policies that provide funding and support for educators in communities who will work to foster the agency of Black youth and will help them to succeed – on their own terms.

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## APPENDIX A

**Individual Interview Protocol for Youth Workers**Personal Background

1. Can you tell me about yourself? (Probe on where they're from, education background)
  - a. Where did you grow up?
2. How do you identify racially/ethnically?
3. How do you think your background, personal and educational experience, affects how you came to youth work?

Organizational Role

1. What's your title and please describe the functions of your position?
  - a. How long have you been working here?
  - b. What are your specific responsibilities?
  - c. Describe what you find the most rewarding?
  - d. Describe what you find the most challenging?
2. Tell me the story of how you came to work for this program?
  - a. What attracted you to this organization?
  - b. What was your initial reaction to the area the program is in?
  - c. What was your impression of the organization's space?

Organizational and Contextual Understanding

3. Can you tell me about the demographics of the youth in the program?
4. Had you worked in youth programs serving this population before?
  - a. If yes, can you tell me more about your prior experiences?
  - b. If no, what are the factors that made you decide to work in this field of youth work?
5. When you think of Harlem, what do you think of?
  - a. Do you live in Harlem or nearby? Did you live in Harlem prior to working for the program? Why or why not?
  - b. What was your impression of the community members in Harlem before you worked her? What about now?
6. What do you think are the major problems facing Black youth in school?
7. What do you think are some of positive experiences youth in the program have in schools?
8. What do you think are the issues facing youth residing in Harlem and similar contexts around the city? (Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens, etc).

- a. How would you characterize the sources of these issues? Or what do you think are the causes of these challenges?
  - b. Have you noticed any differences in what youth experience across the NY boroughs?
  - c. What do you think youth gain from being these contexts?
  - d. What do you think is the most difficult issue that Black students have to navigate in their schools? Families? Neighborhoods?
9. What policy or set of policies (youth, education, or otherwise) do you think affect Black youth the most? Please explain why and how?
- a. How do you feel they are impacted by these policies?
10. How do you explain social or political problems in the community/society to youth here?
11. How do you feel the program addresses or confronts these issues?

### Program Structure and Philosophy

12. Can you explain the various levels of adult relationships that transpire in the program? (Probe on board of directors, full time staff, part-time staff, instructors, guests, etc).
- a. How do you feel about this?
13. Describe the student's relationship to adult staff. Can you give me examples of how youth and adults interact?
- a. How much contact do you have with youth here?
14. How do you define this program and what it does for youth?
- a. How do you explain it to others? (friends, family, other educators, etc.)
15. Please tell me how the program is structured?
- a. What are the different components of the program? How do you feel about this?
16. Can you tell me about the specific department you work in?
- a. Describe the differences and similarities between your department and the other two departments of the program?
  - b. How do you think about your specific responsibilities in your department as it relates to how you understand the issues facing Black youth?
17. Can you tell me about the purpose and mission of the program? How do you feel about it?
18. How do you describe what your organization provides for Black youth?
- a. Is there a philosophy or ideology that drives your program? If so, can you tell me about it?

- b. How was this philosophy created? Who was involved in the development of this perspective?
  - c. How do students and parents respond to the program's philosophy?
    - i. Describe how this operates in practice on a day-to-day basis.
19. How do you think your program differs in philosophy and pedagogy from other programs geared towards the same population?
20. How do you think youth understand the programs in your department?
21. What have you noticed about the students' responses specific opportunities your department provides?
22. Describe the most important pieces of knowledge you want students to have? Are there any particular skills you wish to enhance?
23. What is it you want Black students to know about themselves?
24. Describe the differences you notice in high school students as they progress from ninth to twelfth grade?

#### Pedagogy and Relationship with Youth

25. Can you share with me how you construct the curriculum in your department?
26. Is there a teaching philosophy here? If yes, can you explain what they are?
  - a. Describe how your teaching philosophy works?
  - b. Describe how the organization came to this teaching philosophy or type of practices?
  - c. How do you feel about them? What are the success and challenges with this approach?
  - d. How do you get others (new instructors, donors, etc) to believe in your approach
    - i. How do you think this affects the hiring that you/or the program does?
27. How does the social and political context the organization exists within influence how you design curriculum?
  - a. Teaching practices?
  - b. How does this understanding shape the hiring of instructors here?
28. How do you think your practices or the way you think about pedagogy differs from other members of the staff here?
29. How do you think the teaching practices here differ from other youth programs in the Harlem community? Explain?

#### Framing of Youth and Work Experience

30. Tell me what you have learned from your work in the program?
31. Can you describe the greatest reward in your work?

32. Can you tell me about the greatest challenge in your work?
33. How do you think your work shapes how Black youth are viewed in schools or in larger society?
34. What's your vision for Black youth? How do you see the work you do in this program shaping that vision?
  - a. Does your vision differ from how you think other organizations view Black students?
35. Describe what you think is important for schools to know about the work you do with youth? Education policymakers? Funders?
36. Who would you like to share your vision of Black youth with?
37. Describe your long-term professional goals?
38. Is there a question that I should have asked but didn't?
39. Is there anything else you want to add?



## APPENDIX B

**Focus Group Question Guide**

- What do you all see as the issues facing Black youth in Harlem and similar boroughs in the city?
- What are the issues you see facing the Black youth in this program? Are these issues different from what other youth experience? Explain.
- How do you think about the Black youth in your program? How do you feel society views them? How does this thinking inform your teaching practices and curriculum development?
- Talk about the philosophy of the organization. Do you think your approach with youth here is widespread across youth programming in Harlem?
  - How would you describe your popularity as an organization serving youth in Harlem? Is popularity a concern for you? Why do you think other programs are popular?
  - Is there an attempt to make sure everyone who works here embodies your philosophy? (regardless of their level of interaction with youth)
    - Probe on hiring and volunteers, etc.
- Do you think there is a collective program identity present in the program? Explain why or why not?
  - How is this displayed throughout the program?