

PIPELINE TO POWER: A CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF MY
JOURNEY TO BLACK YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

by

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

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University of Texas at Arlington, 2022

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Through an arts-based autoethnography, I explored the influences and experiences that informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming. Although there is a significant amount of scholarship on Black youth empowerment programming and its importance to Black children, there is limited literature on how one becomes a Black youth empowerment facilitator in the community. I sought to answer the following questions: (1) How did external forces and people inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming? (2) How did my inner drive and consciousness inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming? (3) How does a critique of power, privileges, and oppressions of my experiences inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming? Through critical reflection journals, photos, and interviews data collection, three findings were identified. The first finding is that external forces and people from my childhood community helped me understand communal Black resilience to care for each other despite the conditions of the Black community. The second finding is that my inner drive and consciousness caused me to have an epiphany while serving in the Iraqi Desert War about helping Black youth have choices in their life beyond military enlistment. The final finding centered on my understanding of how social injustices make Black youth empowerment a must in my community and the privileges that allowed me to answer such a call of service.

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I first thank the Creator for the life, health, and strength to endure, persist, believe, and complete this journey. I honor the Ancestors whose shoulders I stand on my tiptoes to continually reach for the potential of the purpose that I was created to pursue.

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Bayboo aka all the other little names I have created for you over the years! I am beyond grateful to you and love you from the deepest!

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, Junichi Lockett, Sr. aka Jimbo, aka Warrior Daddy, and Lucinda Lockett, aka Cindy, aka Mama, who had starring roles in this dissertation but also played powerful roles in influencing my life's journey and mission. I am eternally grateful for your love, sacrifice, and determination to provide Jo-Jo and me (and all those that you connected with, including our older sister) all that you could! As my Warrior Daddy rests in power, I will continue to honor his artistic potential, warrior leadership, and training through actualizing it in my life's work.

I also dedicate this work to all my children, regardless of how you came into my life, Julani, Juleel, Jaylana, Jarikah, Lela, Anna, Ree-Ree, and Logan, aka Little Peanut, Little Butterball, Butterbean, Potapenko, and all the names that I have created to call each of you over the years! You are all full of powerful potential and are destined for greatness! Stay focused on the Mission!

To all the Black youth and families that I have had the pleasure to connect with in some form, whether it was through coaching, advocacy, training, teaching, or some other way, I dedicate this work to you for allowing me the opportunity to be a village partner in your developmental process! It has been critical to shaping my life!

To the kinship network, which was the village that helped raise me, such as coaches, friends, extended family, teachers, and others, I am thankful and dedicate this work to you!

And to future generations of Black youth, I dedicate this work to the future with hopes of aiding your future greatness and impact!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The sea of Black youth and families seemed to go on for miles as I carefully adjusted my glasses to fully capture the overwhelming sight of what I could not have envisioned over 50 years before that moment. My children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren stood in formation behind me as I scanned the massive crowd with a cocktail of emotions bubbling in my chest. The sun seemed to smile with rays of precision, providing a temperature of perfection to complement the essence of the momentous occasion.

The 50th anniversary of opening the first Pipeline to Power Center for Empowerment and Community Building (P2PCECB) began as an online entity focused on facilitating Black youth empowerment programming, an internship program, advocacy development, and community-based research. Fifty years later, the P2PCECB had expanded into 21 brick and mortar facilities in urban and rural areas across the United States, 11 countries across the African diaspora, countless vital partnerships, and SMART technology that optimizes the development process of any Black youth and community. Thus, impacting the lives of over six million Black youth and families who have engaged in transforming Black community settings covering approximately 44 million acres of geographical space. More importantly, it had been nearly seven decades since I had dedicated my life to youth and community development work.

A tear migrated to the outer corner of my left eye as the mistress of the ceremony emboldened the roar from the crowd of Black youth and families after uttering my identifier and nodding towards me to finally address the crowd. Another tear invaded my right eye as the crowd's boisterous pronunciation of "Coach J" resounded through my eardrums. Many years ago, I had accepted the understanding that Black youth empowerment work was an

unappreciated and “thankless” work. However, at that moment, I sincerely appreciated the show of appreciation from those who represented the manifestation of whom I made a declaration to help nearly 70 years prior.

I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a quiet moment on an airbase in the sweltering Iraqi desert, characterized by uncertainty, as I was unsure what the next moment would hold. The notion of the uncertainty contributed to my enlistment in the United States Marine Corps nearly five years before. The sentiment of uncertainty seemed to become a staple in my life since being a senior at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Fort Worth, Texas. That was until an epiphany emerged of me engaging in the empowerment of future generations and guiding them to make decisions about their future based on their desired vision and not out of the type of desperation that I had experienced. That was the mission, and on that, I became confident.

Yet, there had been many more experiences, people, and interactions in my life as a Black youth growing up in an urban, predominantly Black community that had fueled that epiphany of the vision for engaging in Black youth empowerment work. I understood that even as I approached nearly 100 years of living, I must continue to tell the stories of those that contributed to shaping my worldview and sparking a resilient fire in me that fostered my sense of determination to provide the same spark to younger generations who have proven that their collective greatness would permeate future generations and provoke sustainable transformation and opportunities. They must continue to build the “Pipeline to Power!”

With my lapel mic positioned perfectly to pick up the pitch of my voice, I raised my right fist to call the troops to attention as I had done for decades. Accordingly, the roar of the crowd quieted to the tone of a sleeping baby as I proceeded to speak the words that I had spoken to the Black youth, which I called “young warriors,” many decades before to spark their pursuit,

resilience, and “fight” for greatness, thus setting the stage for the empowered reality that the current generation of Black youth is experiencing now in the year 2071:

“Young Warriors, this is for you, the X factor, the ones that they don’t see coming.”

“You are our greatest asset, the most critical puzzle piece to a vision of a powerful people.”

“Reconnecting us to our powerful, natural position, royalty.”

“Thronin’, owning and operating communities and land that demands global respect, the global connects, you are natural genius, unleash it, young warriors.”

“You can be the change the game, rearrange the shame, change the game, dominate every obstacle, accomplish goals so phenomenal, the world can’t help but proclaim your name.”

“Young Warriors, listen, our vision is more significant than our circumstance, our mission is greater than the war within, the war we win when we stand on who we are within and don’t pretend,

“And don’t pretend to be someone you’re not just to make a friend, we make the trends, we trendsetters, we been that been there, done that, we run that, we were everywhere before anybody else was anywhere, that’s a fun fact.”

“Now I know that’s not what they say in his-story, well this our-story, that’s my comeback, I come, Black, straight up.”

“If anybody comes against my young warriors, you better get cho’ weight up, but wait up,

“I just came to say, warriors wake up, soul-jas check-in, what mission are we on today?”

Background of Study

The implementation of youth development initiatives to aid the developmental process of Black youth in the United States has been implemented since the late 18th century. However, the proliferation of structural racism and oppression in America exacerbated the need for Black

adults to foster the capacity of Black youth to navigate discriminatory practices. Theriault (2018) notes that before *Plessy v. Ferguson* and legalized segregation, Black youth endured acts of violence and harassment, inequitable facilities, and unfair social norms to engage in opportunities for engagement in developmental activities. Consequently, these oppressive acts against Black youth minimized their participation in programs facilitated by government, non-profit, or other non-Black entities (Halpern, 2002).

During the enslavement of African people in the United States, Black families formulated opportunities to teach Black youth the notion of identity through family intercommunication, thus creating a synergy along with spiritual values that bolstered the strength of morals and character, despite the sanctioned racial violence and oppression of the period (Mintz, 1999; Raboteau, 2004). Furthermore, extended family or kinship networks (Hahn, 2003) played a critical role in the development of Black children as enslaved parents were often subjected to extended forced labor hours that hindered their direct influence on their children (Illick, 2005; Raboteau, 2004). Gutman (1987) extends that kinship networks contributed to the development of Black youth in craft skills, oral traditions, religion, history, morality, and identity.

As a result of enslaved African people being mandated to labor on adjoining plantations and laws that dictated that Black children belonged to their mother's owner, kinship networks often evolved beyond plantation boundaries taking on community-based contexts referred to as neighborhoods (Theriault, 2018). While neighborhood constructs were characterized by instability due to the potentiality of enslaved Africans being sold, they provided an environment for socialization and a sense of place and belonging that contributed to positive development for Black youth. Pathways for youth development, such as literacy development, which strengthened

self-esteem, and learned to hunt and utilize medicinal plants, which fostered skills for survival, were often promoted in enslaved African neighborhood constructs (Glave, 2011; King, 2011).

The development of Black youth persisted into the Reconstruction era after 1865, as the concept of Black communities or neighborhoods expanded after the American Civil War. While the proliferation of violence against Black people continued with the increase of lynching by mobs to terrorize and enforce segregation, many Black kinship networks or communities fought for their children to be educated (Floyd and Mowatt, 2014; Theriault, 2018). However, with the denial of many newly freed Black people and force labor law mandates placed on many Black children, both the uniting of biological families and gaining of supportive income were often negated, relegating Black kinship networks to continue forging independent efforts for Black youth development. Consequently, schools, churches, and childcare support were constructed in Black community settings as spaces to cultivate the development of Black youth (Jackson Jr., 2005). Not only did Black community members in these settings formulate spaces to foster positive self-identity, leadership skills, and a sense of community in Black youth, but they also volunteered time and resources to construct educational institutions and teach (Jackson Jr., 2005; Mitchell, 2008). While Black families viewed extensive efforts to educate Black children as opportunities to stay informed, gain employment, and boost protection against labor contract exploitation, many White entities perceived it as a threat to White supremacy (Mitchell, 2008).

The Jim Crow Era, which was characterized by a continuance of incessant violence against Black people, encompassed a great migration of Black families to the northern cities in hopes of escaping racial terrorism. Many migrant families settled into predominantly Black neighborhoods, while often, the persistence of low economic status, racial violence, and segregation policies aggravated poor living conditions within these settings (Woodward, 1974).

Consequently, issues such as poor health, high mortality, and juvenile delinquency elevated as mainstream efforts to institute parks and playgrounds ignored Black youth. At the same time, Whites often used violence to prevent Black youth from participating in these spaces (Franklin and Moss, 1994). Black facilitators of Black youth development and education, such as in settlement houses, Black churches, and schools, persisted in offering Black youth opportunities to engage in recreational, religious, and educational activities.

After the decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* of 1954, which mandated the integration of Black youth into White schools, the need for distinct approaches to guide the thriving of Black youth was exacerbated, as Black teachers, staff, pedagogy, and curriculum significant to their development failed to be integrated into White school contexts (Lateef, 2020). Thus, in the 1960s, Black community members, activists, and scholars served as critical contributors to instituting culturally relevant approaches to Black youth development to empower them with the knowledge, tools, and resources to navigate the social and environmental inequities persistent in American society (Grills et al., 2016; Lateef, 2021). The facilitation of Black youth development translated into the formulation of community-based out-of-school, African-centered rites of passage and independent educational programs often led by Black organizations such as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and other Black Nationalist and Pan-African organizations (Garcha, 2019).

Concerted efforts persist in research and practice to shift the notion of universal youth development from a deficit-based approach, in which youth are perceived as problems to be solved, to an asset-based approach, in which youth are perceived as assets deserving of development, as in the Five Cs Positive Youth Development framework (Lerner, 2005). The continuance of distinct social inequalities affecting Black youth, such as structural racism,

divestment in Black community settings, and negative mainstream media images, necessitates implementing Black youth development efforts that address their ability to navigate challenges and bolster racial identity development (Lloyd and Williams, 2017). The perspectives of Black youth programming facilitators remain primarily absent from academic and public discourse, which affects policy and practice in the field.

Problem Statement

Persisting elements of systemic racism and oppression continue to affect Black families and communities, particularly Black youth. The developmental process of Black youth to actualize their full potential is affected by social inequities in American society (Grills et al., 2016; McIlwain, 2013). Moreover, historically and current divestment in Black community settings has worsened disparities such as substandard schools, community spaces, housing, and economic opportunities, thus increasing the difficulty for many Black youths to navigate for survival and a sense of thriving (Akom, 2006; Carter, 2003). According to McIlwain (2013), the historical and current proliferation of demonization and devaluation of Black life in mainstream media coverage further complicates the efforts of those engaged in Black youth development work, thus elevating the need for leaders in the field to continue clarifying and cultivating Black youth empowerment approaches.

Since the mid-20th century, activists, educators, and community members have developed and implemented culturally relevant youth empowerment approaches to help Black youth overcome complex circumstances faced in American society (Baldrige, 2014; Richardson & Van Brakle, 2013). The development of Black youth, particularly in the United States, requires not only a strengths-based model but also an empowerment-based approach, inundated with culturally relevant frameworks that bolster racial identity, critical consciousness, and sense

of responsibility (Lateef, 2021; Lerner et al., 2005; Travis et al., 2014). However, limited literature investigates culturally relevant approaches to positive Black youth development to bolster their empowerment. Furthermore, a gap persists in the research exploring the perceptions of Black facilitators' lived experiences of Black youth empowerment programming and how those experiences inform their approach to their work with Black youth populations. As a Black youth empowerment programming leader, I provided insight into how experiences as a Black youth in Black community settings have influenced my journey and approach to engaging in this field.

Purpose Statement & Research Questions

The purpose of this art-based autoethnographic study was to explore the influences and experiences that informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming. Therefore, I critically reflected on my personal and professional experiences from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood and how they informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming. I utilized critical reflective techniques to explore my perceptions of relationships, actions, and interactions relative to my childhood, adolescence, and adulthood that contributed to my approach to facilitating Black youth empowerment programming, including community members, peers, educational influences, and community-based partnerships. Moreover, this study intended to creatively share stories to depict my perceptions of my experiences while also sharing stories to illustrate my experiences facilitating empowerment-based and African-centered youth development utilized to bolster the actualization of Black youth.

In this study, I provide alternative and supplemental methods for community-based and institutional entities that engage in the educational and developmental processes of Black youth

to implement culturally relevant empowerment practices that consider the distinct context of Black youth in society, highlight and celebrate unique history and heritage, galvanize natural abilities, prioritize strengthening social capital and community building, while countering deficit-based approaches that contribute to adverse outcomes for Black youth, such as the “pipeline to prison.” Lastly, this study was purposed to instigate, through inspiration and spotlighting Black adults and youth, the engagement in and contribution to the development of Black youth and Black community settings. Through enacting the practice of critical reflection of self-experiences for analysis, as modeled in this study, and engaging in the study of historical and current contexts relating to Black people, the consciousness and awareness of Black people may be stimulated or strengthened to operate as the social capital or the “village” to foster Black youth empowerment, which may positively impact Black community transformative efforts. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How did external forces and people inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming?
2. How did my inner drive and consciousness inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming?
3. How does a critique of power, privileges, and oppressions of my experiences inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming?

Through an arts-based autoethnography study, I provided insight into the possibilities of creating Black spaces where Black youth can thrive as people, students, and future community leaders.

Rationale for Study & Significance

In American society, Black youth are often stigmatized as a problematic demographic that “needs” to be solved instead of assets that deserve to be actualized through support,

investment, and development (Lerner, 2012). While the notion of positive youth development has emerged in research to counter deficit-based youth development models, those offering discourse regarding the development of Black youth are often minimally engaged in practical efforts to foster the thriving of Black youth and Black community settings. Consequently, the voices of current and former Black youth have been omitted from public and academic discourse about Black youth development. Furthermore, the voices of former Black youth who engage in Black youth development work also endure exclusion from the academic discussion surrounding Black youth development. Thus, this study will add to the literature on Black youth development. This study can serve as a guide for those who work or desire to work with Black youth.

Exploring the lived experiences of a former Black youth now engaged in leading Black youth empowerment programming as an adult may provide insights and solutions to issues surrounding the perceived developmental gaps of Black youth and the transformative needs for Black community settings. This study explored the role of the reflective voice that highlights the influences that activate one's consciousness to engage in perceived critical human serving work. In this study, I offered an intergenerational and communal perspective that may advance the readers' understanding of how Black youth empowerment programming has a deep-rooted impact on Black communities. Beyond an academic exercise, in this study, I hoped to inspire Black people to tell our stories of ways we retain each other while experiencing oppression and even death. In other words, this study sought to increase the underscoring of reflective voices of former Black youth who have transitioned to leading Black youth empowerment programming to inform academic and public discourse while strengthening pragmatic approaches to Black youth empowerment work.

As the sociological contexts of the world continue to evolve, I sought to spark approaches to Black youth empowerment work and how Black youth facilitators are trained to optimize this work also to evolve. With the continuation of technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence and digital currency, that influence economic and political shifts, I hoped to challenge Black youth facilitators to re-imagine their work and envision how their approach to this work will have a sustainable impact on future generations. Conclusively, I hoped to add to the literature regarding Black youth empowerment to enhance its potency and hold a sustainable impact on the future of research in this field.

Background of the Researcher

“Here is your little brother!” my mama announced as she handed me this tightly wrapped bundle of a human. I held this newborn, uncertain if I safely had him, let alone what this new normal of living as a “big brother” would entail. I understood that Black families in primarily Black communities having multiple children were not unusual; most of my friends on the east side of Fort Worth, Texas, had siblings. However, the arrival of my little brother, Johvan, also referred to as “Jo-Jo,” was a shock to my system because I had spent nearly twelve years of my life as the “only child.” I had an older “half-sister” that came to visit sometimes, but it did not compare to this new everyday sibling situation. See, before Jo-Jo, the only in-house siblings that I had were the ones I created in my mind when I played with those little green army men that came in a pack of 100. I realized that with this new addition to the family, I would now have to...share. I would have to share my time, space, food, and not mention my parents. However, what I did not realize at the time, is that this would be my first opportunity to engage in the developmental process of a Black child.

Warrior Daddy Boot Camp

Contrary to widespread belief, as it relates to Black urban neighborhoods, every Black youth is not “fatherless.” In fact, in my childhood community, although often referred to as the “hood,” I remember many Black fathers who held a consistent presence in their children’s lives. However, one father lived close to me for my entire childhood and adolescence, my father, whom I referred to as “Daddy,” which I often pronounced “Da-dae.” Standing at 5 feet and 7 inches, with jet black straight hair, and a yellow skin tone, which resulted from a combination of characteristics from his mix of African and Japanese blood, my father was the original “drill instructor.” He prepared me for my life’s mission. Although he was born in Okinawa, Japan, to a Japanese mother, Sachiko, my father was adopted by the Lockett family, an African American military family, at the age of two, along with his older sister, Hasame, who were both sent to live in the United States.

Under the legal name Junichi Lockett and the nickname “Jimbo,” my father grew up in the “Creek” area of the historically Black neighborhood on the east side of Fort Worth, Texas, known simply as Stop Six. Despite standing out as different with his unique Asian features, my daddy engaged in the same activities and often nuisances as other Black youth during the 1960s. At least, that is what he and other family members told me. He nor they ever discussed my father being engaged in the Civil Rights nor the Black Power movement, like many other Black young people whom I have read about and seen in historical texts and documentaries. However, I was told from many diverse sources that my Daddy was involved in initiating a street crew called the “Creek Boys,” which was notorious for being a tight-knit group of Black youth that sometimes engaged in fighting and other mischievous incidents in the neighborhood. Subsequently, little “Jimbo” began losing interest in school and eventually dropped out of the legendary Paul Laurence Dunbar High School at 5700 Ramey Avenue.

Although my Daddy was considered an O.G. or Original Gangster of this street crew, his discussions with me about his involvement were minimal and never glorified that he was engaged in harmful activities. Usually, family members and his past friends would discuss the trouble he got into, like having “fast hands” for fighting, which I would eventually find out firsthand in my adolescence after attempting to “talk back.” On the other hand, my Daddy would often drive me around the “Creek” area of Stop Six and point out the houses of childhood friends and supportive families that helped him in his childhood, sometimes stopping to introduce me to them. He would also tell me the background stories of Black youth he grew up with through the 1950s and 1960s who either died before they made it to the 1980s or got caught up in the whirlwind of the crack cocaine era and other drugs that hit many urban Black communities like a tsunami in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s. Interestingly, my Daddy would always highlight the natural talents they displayed before their downfall. One such childhood friend was named Bull, whom I had seen many times in the “Creek,” either walking down the street yelling and conversing with imaginary people or buying nail polish at the corner store.

“See, ole’ Bull was one of the most intelligent kids at Dunbar, but he got caught up in that sniffing and getting high,” my daddy expressed to me as he shook his head at the thought of the lost potential.

Then there was Cohese, who died by gunshot at a party.

“Man, Cohese could have been a boxing champion, had some of the fastest hands in the city. But he got into it with this cat, who lured him outside and shot him because he knew he could not whoop Cohese in a fistfight,” my father discussed, as though the incident had just happened the night before.

Bull and Cohese were just a couple of the many Black youths from my Daddy's childhood that he lamented about being talented but not reaching their full potential. However, his natural talent and genius seemed to be the ones that never entirely had the chance to impact the world.

"Daddy, what is this old drawing pad?" I remember asking my father as I held out a worn vanilla-colored sketch pad.

"Well, this is my old sketch pad from when I took an art class at Tarrant County Junior College." He responded, taking the book from my hand and flipping through a couple of pages before stopping on one drawing.

"Here is one I drew showing me boxing in Golden Gloves when I was younger." My Daddy announced with a smile as he presented a pristine and highly detailed graphite sketch of him in a boxing ring throwing a left overhand punch. I recalled my Mama and his siblings told me that my father was a talented artist and boxer, but it was not until I viewed this drawing that I realized how talented he indeed was. I began to understand where I had received my inkling to be creative as a child and student. I remember bursting with excitement to sketch in my father's sketchbook. However, I realized something. While the sketch of my father's boxing was outstanding, many other pages were either blank or had unfinished sketches, including an incomplete drawing of my mother. He rarely picked up a pencil to sketch and often shied away from discussing any subject reminding him of his artistic genius.

Many thousands of miles away from the island of Okinawa, my father was immersed in the contextual complexities of being a Black youth in America, which often required an ability to navigate a society filled with inequities. Although my Daddy redeemed his life after dropping out of high school at an early age by completing his GED, completing a trade school program,

completing military service, becoming a welder, husband, and father, the optimization of his talent was left just like the graphite sketch of my mother, incomplete and unfinished. As my hands pen these words, many questions permeate my mind wondering why a man with such talent and leadership identified in his childhood did not pursue it. Was it due to family and community's lack of support and guidance? Was it because he did not have someone to help him develop his vision of becoming a renowned artist? Was it a lack of exposure to opportunities to perfect his craft? Or was it the pressure of being a father to a son in the 1980s, in which the incarceration rates for young Black males skyrocketed to unprecedented rates in the United States? Essentially, was it because of me?

On the 22nd day of January in 1980, a Hershey chocolate brown-skinned child was born on a snow-infused afternoon in Fort Worth, Texas, at Harris Methodist Hospital. When my Mama, Lucinda Lockett, handed me over to my Daddy, I could only imagine what he thought as he looked into my deep brown eyes. Did he have an epiphany in which he envisioned a future where I would have the opportunity to maximize my talents? Did he declare that he would give his best effort to prepare me for and protect my chance to pursue my highest potential, even if it meant sacrificing the opportunity to pursue his own?

From his worldview, my father must have perceived that for his first-born son, Junichi Lockett, Jr., to be prepared and protected to pursue my potential in this world, he would have to raise me with me a level of intensity and love to foster mental toughness, resilience, and leadership in every area of my life, a level of development he may have felt he lacked as a Black youth.

Like many other youths in America, particularly Black boys, my introduction to sports came early. However, my father did not just put a basketball or football in my hand and allowed

me to stumble my way into athletic proficiency. There was always intense training that preceded every level. From having to dribble my basketball up and down the hill with my left hand (my off-hand) several times before being able to remove the Master Lock from the bottom of the net of my basketball goal to throwing thousands of passes in the cold with a football that read “frozen rope,” to try out for quarterback for tackle pee-wee football, my Warrior Daddy challenged me to push myself beyond what may have been considered normal among other youth. Subsequently, I became one of the best quarterbacks of my age, despite being one of the shortest in stature. My Daddy would buckle a weight belt to my waist, tie a rope around it, and attach it to car and truck tires for me to pull, like a John Deere tractor. Even though my friends would often be annoyed by me having to complete my training before I could play outside or go anywhere, they would often join in to experience my Daddy’s brand of fatherhood firsthand.

Yet, the notion of intense training and development transcended the world of youth-organized sports as my "Daddy" would assign various articles from our local newspaper, the Star-Telegram, for me to read and present summaries of the content. While this task was just as arduous as those previously discussed, it boosted my confidence and excitement to write and read aloud as a student. I even became the spelling bee champion in back-to-back years at A.M. Pate Elementary. A proclivity to face challenges and “fight” through them, like an African warrior, was instilled in me through the “boot camp” that my “Warrior Daddy” trained me in.

When I got injured in my senior year of high school after the football season and my opportunity to play football at the college level was negated, my Warrior Daddy had prepared me to endure disappointment and uncertainty. When I found myself in the middle of the Iraqi desert as a United States Marine envisioning a future of impacting the lives of Black youth, my Warrior Daddy had prepared me to make it home to pursue it. When I became a father for the first time in

my twenties, not sure if I was ready for this imperative responsibility, I realized that my Warrior Daddy had prepared me to navigate the obstacles of being a Black father in America. On an early Saturday morning in 2017, on December 2nd, when my mother cried out, “He’s gone,” as my Daddy transitioned from this lifetime, his approach to my development prepared me to continue pursuing my mission in his absence.

Although we never got the chance to discuss all the questions I have about what influenced him as a Black youth and what informed my father’s approach to developing me as a Black youth, I know that his approach was instrumental in equipping me to explore the critical reflections of my experiences that informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming. At this moment, I realize that this art-based autoethnographic study, which undergirds the intensification of Black youth empowerment work, is vital because it: (a) upholds a vision of unlocking and actualizing the innate talents and abilities in black youth that will strengthen their capacity to impact their families, while affecting social positively and community transformation that will sustain into future generations; (b) honors and continues the legacy of our ancestors, such as my Warrior Daddy, who envisioned empowered opportunities today for us to pursue our visions and optimize our talents; and (c) reinvigorates, honors and advances the legacy of my Daddy’s creative and artistic genius through an art-based approach to research, which he may have thought he sacrificed for me (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Warrior Daddy and me. My Daddy held me as a Black child, protecting my opportunity to pursue my future. Mama took the photo.

Definitions of Key Terms

Adolescent: a young person in the process of development from a child to an adult

African-centered/Afrocentric: An epistemological view that focuses on re-centering the worldview of Black/people of African descent to a perspective that positions them to pursue social, political, and economic liberation/empowerment (Asante, 1990).

African American: people of African descent who have residence and/or were primarily socialized in the United States of America (Sellers et al., 1998)

Black: the term “Black” is an ambiguous term used to characterize the racial identity of a group of people who may or may not include people of African descent, depending on the individual’s viewpoint. Moreover, the term “Black” is capitalized to signify the specific name (pronoun) of the group of people being characterized or characterizing themselves by this racial identifier (Sellers et al., 1998).

Black communities: geographical locations comprised primarily of people of African descent

Black youth: children, adolescents, and young adults of African descent

Black Youth Empowerment: the practice of activating development strategies that help the youth of African descent to understand their intrinsic “power” or capabilities to thrive despite challenges they may face and engage in critical action to affect change (Travis & Leech, 2014).

Culturally Relevant: using cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives to inform an approach to engaging a cultural dynamic (ex. using African centered pedagogy to instruct Black students to understand the concepts from their worldview) (Pinckney et al., 2020).

Euro-Centric: viewing the world from a European or “White” perspective; often regarded as the dominant default worldview (Asante, 1990).

Positive Youth Development: a strength-based alternative approach (viewing youth as assets to be developed) to the deficit-based models (viewing youth as problems to be solved) that have been historically advanced to frame youth development work (Lerner, 2005)

Theoretical Framework

To bolster my exploration of my experiences as a Black youth in a Black community setting and my developmental journey to facilitating Black youth empowerment programming, I utilized Critical Consciousness Development (CCD) as a theoretical framework.

Critical Consciousness Development

Critical consciousness is characterized by the conceptualization of awareness surrounding social, political, and economic inequalities, thus fostering the inclination to confront the systems that perpetuate the injustices against a demographic of people (Watts et al., 2011). The concept of critical consciousness was formulated as a pedagogical approach to bolster the empowerment of Brazilian laborers using “critical reading” to engage in discussion and analysis to foster change in unequal social conditions (Freire, 1993). According to Freire (1970), oppressed

factions of people have an increased potential to take individual and collective action to liberate themselves when provided the opportunity to foster an analytical understanding of the system perpetuating their oppression. Freire's view of critical consciousness and liberation psychology (Martin-Baro, 1994) have been correlated to examine how consciousness or awareness of inequality is cultivated in marginalized youth to engage in social and community transformation (Diemer & Li, 2011).

The cooperation between psychosocial constructs such as critical reflection, critical agency or sociopolitical efficacy, and critical action bolsters critical consciousness development, particularly in youth. Tyler et al. (2020) contended that a child with potent critical reflection capabilities is perceptive to societal inequities and understands how they negatively affect the well-being of their family, community, and themselves. Consequently, the growth of awareness of oppressive contexts informs the youth's perception of their ability to affect change in unjust systems (the socio-political efficacy). Thus, critical action is fostered for youth to engage in practical behaviors intended to enact transformative change in their community settings while breaching oppressive systemic unfairness.

Freire (1993) advanced an approach to bolstering critical consciousness that utilized cultural circles, characterized by intentional collective dialogue and analysis by participants regarding real-world situations, such as impoverished workers discussing the conditions of their worksite. However, more contemporary approaches to critical consciousness development have emerged, including youth participatory action research, a collaborative process where youth actively engage in research to affect community change, and interventions challenging youth to analyze and create media, such as hip-hop music videos, television, and film, to spark action to transform community inequities (Diemer et al., 2016). According to Rapa (2016), critical

reflective writing has been implemented as an interventive measure to foster critical consciousness by guiding youth to journal about their perceptions on how examining inequalities and unfairness in their environments motivated critical action in their schools and communities. Critical consciousness development, particularly with youth who have experienced oppressive conditions, has led to contextual outcomes of action that impact school and community conditions, such as implementing school or community-based youth programs (Diemer et al., 2016).

In this study, I used the CCD theoretical framework to guide my data generation through initiating the first phase of critical consciousness development, critical reflection. As a Black youth growing up in an urban and primarily Black community setting in America, I engaged in an analysis of oppressive social and political conditions, such as racism, that permeated my experiences into adulthood. Furthermore, I analyzed the data from my critical reflections to examine the development of my socio-political efficacy or perception of being empowered and equipped to engage in transformative action, which is the second phase of the CCD theoretical model. Lastly, I utilized the CCD theoretical framework to examine how my critical reflections and perceptions of efficacy and agency informed my critical action and engagement in leading Black youth empowerment programming.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation encompasses five chapters. Chapter One provided the reader with an introduction, background, statement of the problem, rationale, the definition of key terms, and theoretical framework for this study. Chapter Two provided a review and analysis of a wide range of literature on the notions of social capital, positive youth development, empowerment-based positive youth development for Black youth, African-Centered positive youth

development, and a historical and current context for Black youth empowerment facilitators. Chapter Three described how, through an art-based auto-ethnographic approach, I depicted my firsthand experiences to inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming. Chapter Four encompassed findings that emerged by addressing the study's research questions and creative artistic expressions depicting my perceived pivotal life experiences, thus telling my story through transitional periods of being a Black youth. Chapter Five comprises the discussion, implications, research boundaries, future research prospectus, practical recommendations, and a conclusive epilogue.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Continual effects of current and historical oppression continue to impact Black families and communities, especially Black youth. Racial, environmental, social, and other inequities often negatively affect the transition of Black youth from birth through childhood and into adulthood (Grills et al., 2016; McIlwain, 2013). Moreover, the lack of investment in Black communities has resulted in substandard schools, community spaces, housing, and economic opportunities, thus impacting the ability of many Black youths to navigate these disparities (Akom, 2006; Carter, 2003). Consequently, Black community stakeholders, such as activists, educators, and community members, have engaged in developing and implementing youth empowerment approaches to address the nuanced realities of Black youth (Baldrige, 2014; Richardson & Van Brakle, 2013). As part of the community that is presumed to contribute to the development of Black youth, the discussion of literature that informs the practical work of Black youth development facilitators remains pertinent.

This literature review aims to understand how scholars discuss academic work related to Black youth development. The following themes emerged throughout the review of literature: (a) Social Capital for Black Youth Empowerment, (b) Positive Youth Development Model (PYD), (c) Empowerment-based Positive Youth Development for Black Youth, (d) African-centered Youth Development Approach and (e) Black Youth Empowerment Facilitators. In the following sections of this literature review, I discussed literature that examines these emergent themes.

Social Capital for Black Youth Empowerment

The concept of social capital refers to resources produced from established relationships (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986; Ginwright, 2007; Yosso, 2005). According to Carpiano (2006),

the focus on how resources are accessed and utilized within a community context to bolster interpersonal and cooperative action characterizes the notion of “network-based social capital.” The development of social capital is further described as components of social units that foster collective efforts for shared interests (Putnam, 1993, p. 36). Dill and Ozer (2019) further contend that social capital considers the quality of social networks and considers the role of relationships in the increased likelihood of access to resources, such as economic and educational opportunities, about the increase of relationships formulated within a network. Despite the inequities that persist in Black community settings, the notion of agency and advocacy for Black youth has been evident in the collective efforts of community stakeholders, such as community-based organizations, adult role models, and mentors (Ginwright, 2007; Kelley, 2014).

The scholars identified two aspects of network-based social capital: (a) social support and (b) social leverage. According to Briggs (1998), social support characterizes the notion of human resources that an individual accesses to support basic survival and daily coping, such as transportation to school, confiding in someone, or a small cash loan to address an emergency. Moreover, the concept of “bonding” refers to individuals accessing support systems comprised of members of the same ethnic and/or socio-economic group (Kim, Subramanian, & Kawachi, 2006). On the other hand, social leverage characterizes social capital that equips people with knowledge and resources to bolster their development and socio-economic status (Briggs, 1998). Similarly, the concept of “linking” pertains to individuals utilizing their networks and relationships to connect to more significant opportunities for empowerment beyond basic survival (Kim et al., 2006).

In a geographical community context, Dill and Ozer (2019) underscored the aspects of informal social control and neighborhood organization participation as emergent aspects of

network-based social capital. While casual social controls characterize the act of community members cooperatively instilling strategies to secure safety and functionalism, neighborhood organization participation refers to community stakeholders engaging in active organizing efforts to solve social, economic, political, and physical problems affecting the community (Sampson, 2001; Saegert & Winkel, 1998).

Ginwright (2007) argued that critical social capital represents the shift from the universal perception of social capital by centering on the concerted capacity to affect community transformation. Furthermore, critical social capital focuses on the function of racial identity and political consciousness as an asset to impacting Black youth empowerment. Ultimately, Ginwright (2007) noted that critical social capital is facilitated by intergenerational advocacy that challenges negative concepts about Black youth and developed by building a collective racial and cultural identity while being sustained by nurturing an understanding of personal challenges as political issues. Even in distressed Black communities affected by divestment, poverty, and racism, where institutional resources such as affordable housing, quality education, economic opportunities, and secure recreational spaces are not deemed abundant, the presence of resiliency and the critical social capital agency has always been existent (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987).

Carter (2003) argued that Black cultural capital is a nuanced framework differing from the cultural capital framework often related to white communities. The researcher highlights the work of anthropologist John Ogbu by discussing that systemic racism and socio-economic deficiency instigate Black communities to engage in alternative methods to activate social capital to solve problems and empower community members, especially Black youth. Ultimately, the oppositional strategies of distributing and maximizing social capital to benefit Black youth have

been utilized by community-based entities within Black community settings, such as spiritual institutions.

Spiritual institutions, such as Black churches and the Nation of Islam (NOI), have historically provided social support systems and resources for Black families, particularly Black youth (Carter, 2003). Detailing the historical functionality of Black churches as agents of cultural capital in Black communities in his study of Philadelphia, Dubois (1899/1996) purported,

The Negro churches were the birthplace of Negro schools and of all agencies which seek to promote the intelligence of the masses, and even today, no agency serves to disseminate news or information so quickly and effectively among Negroes as the church... Consequently, all movements for social betterment are Apt to center in the churches. Beneficial societies in endless numbers are formed Here, secret societies keep in touch; co-operative and building associations have lately sprung up; the minister often acts as an employment agent; ... so far-reaching are these functions of the church that its organization is almost Political. (pp. 201-207)

Akom (2003) noted the Nation of Islam (NOI) as an entity that facilitated Black youth empowerment. Through his depiction of the NOI in Philadelphia, Akom (2003) illustrated how the organization instilled the ideal of Black achievement while fostering a commitment to community policing, accountability, morality building, academic assistance, and serving as examples of excellence for Black youth.

Black community settings, particularly in the United States, experienced shifts since the late 19th century and early 20th century, with the continued oppression through Jim Crow and the socio-economic degradation caused by the epidemic of “Crack Cocaine” and street gang activity that infiltrated these contexts in the 1980s and 1990s, thus heightening the mass

incarceration of Black people (Fryer et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2016). According to Wacquant (2001), governmental bodies have done more to exacerbate issues within these communities instead of solving them by intensifying the “penal state.” This includes an overbearing influence of police, prison, and schools inundated with mass-incarceration practices, zero-tolerance policies, and public surveillance implementation (Marsh, 2016; Moyer et al., 2020). Consequently, the lack of focus by state-sponsored entities to foster cooperation, equitability, and community building continues to necessitate the development of community-based organizational efforts to facilitate Black youth empowerment.

According to Pittman (1991), community-based organizations providing development for Black youth utilize pragmatic approaches that nurture their growth while equipping them to navigate obstacles. Moreover, these entities tend to focus on galvanizing the natural strengths and abilities of Black youth instead of centering their deficiencies and pathologizing their problems (Ginwright, 2007). In Ginwright’s (2007) study, the Oakland, California-based youth-serving community organization, Leadership Excellence (LE), educates Black youth to enact personal and social transformation. The organization provides development services helping youth heal from trauma caused by issues such as anger, police brutality, experience with abuse, family instability, etc... Subsequently, Black youth strengthen their ability to engage in Black community transformative efforts. Ginwright (2007) concluded in his ethnographic study of the organization, which Black college students started,

First, by reframing the discourse and negative perceptions of Black youth as civic problems, LE views Black youth as critical civic problem solvers. This fundamental conceptual shift allows youth, who typically have little say in addressing policies that shape their daily lives, to voice their ideas and opinions about the issues

that matter...LE's view of Black youth as important political actors is a key to mediating factors in developing and sustaining critical social capital. Second, creating cultural pride and a strong racial identity strengthens critical social capital for youth with turf-based identities antagonistic to those of other neighborhoods. Third, LE cultivates critical social capital by helping youth reframe personal issues as political issues (p. 416).

The opportunity to access social capital for Black youth is essential regardless of socioeconomic status. However, systemic racism and oppression contribute to increased risk factors, thus intensifying the necessity for critical social capital to support Black youth empowerment. Black community-based organizations and entities are vital for agency and advocacy for Black youth, not only as resource distribution but also for providing positive development that is culturally relevant for this population. While social capital within Black community settings is an imperative component necessary to bolster Black youth empowerment, the approaches used to foster the development of Black youth are also crucial to optimizing effectiveness. I identified literature addressing youth development approaches that inform Black youth empowerment programming facilitation in the following sections. Positive youth development (PYD) literature was discussed first to address the universal concept of positive youth development. Secondly, literature examining empowerment-based PYD for Black youth will be addressed to explore the nuances of Black youth development within systemic inequalities and oppression. Literature examining the African-centered approach to PYD is discussed to deepen the understanding of the role of racial and cultural identity development in the practice of Black youth development programming. Finally, literature examining the historical and current context of Black facilitators of Black youth development was discussed.

Positive Youth Development

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) model has been extended as a strength-based alternative approach to the deficit-based models that have been historically advanced to frame youth development work (Lerner et al., 2011). Hamilton (1999) noted PYD as a developmental process, a philosophy or approach to youth programming that guides youth programs and organizations focused on fostering healthy and positive development. Thus, PYD is centered on maximizing youth's positive energy, initiative, and resilience while perceiving them as assets (Lerner et al., 2005). Furthermore, PYD is primarily characterized as an approach that produces sustainable development through the lifespan of youth when the surrounding social capital is sufficiently positioned. Heck and Subramaniam (2009) argued that the frameworks of PYD stimulate resilience and total and healthy well-being that promotes communal support and agency. The prominent PYD model, referred to as the Five Cs of PYD, consists of five outcome indicators as the first-order constructs of healthy youth development: (a) competence, (b) confidence, (c) connection, (d) character, and (e) caring (Lerner et al., 2005). To accomplish the objective of gaining complete comprehension of the PYD model, it is essential to define the first level C components (Lerner et al., 2005; Travis & Leech, 2014)

Competence is characterized as the perception of mastery of ability areas, such as academic performance, productivity, and work achievement. However, this aspect of PYD is also applicable to social, emotional, and physical competencies. *Confidence* refers to self-worth, self-efficacy, and essentially how one perceives one's value in the world instead of a specific behavior or activity (Lerner et al., 2005). *Connection* characterizes the positive and supportive reciprocal kinship with family, friends, and other network-based relationships (Lerner et al., 2005). Travis and Leech (2004) noted that these perceived bonds depict the quality of care for

youth and reflect how they are accepted and affirmed in their lives. Positive family communication, extended family, adult relationships, caring school climate, parent involvement, and community support systems are indicators of youth support.

Character refers to moral identity, attitude towards society and cultural rules, sense of knowing right from wrong, and integrity (Lerner et al., 2005). The notion of valuing diversity has also been included in character measurements (Bowers et al., 2010). Finally, *caring and compassion* refer to empathy, sympathy, and identification with others. Decety (2011) contended that the propensity to be empathetic to other people's displeasure and pain decreases aggressive responses while increasing the inclination to assist others.

Lerner et al. (2005) further discussed the higher level of PYD indication when the 5Cs construct maximizes youth *contribution*. Contribution in PYD refers to youth activating civic engagement for the welfare of their community and the world beyond themselves. This higher level of PYD addresses the concept of developing purpose in youth. Damon (2008) contended that the engagement in actions that contribute to communities is a crucial indicator of maximal PYD and evidence of thriving youth. Moreover, the researcher describes purpose as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something meaningful to the self and meaningful to the world beyond the self, thus centering it as an "ultimate concern" or vision for one's life. Consequently, this purpose organizes one's life's actions and decisions, in which their behavior is the embodiment of their purpose. Ultimately, the individual internalizes and embraces ownership of their purpose, thus centralizing it as their identity.

PYD as Development Science

Hamilton (1999) argued that the first aspect of PYD is that it is a developmental process. Lerner et al. (2011) noted that many developmental science processes emerged following

Hamilton's (1999) study of PYD that were advanced as contributions to describe frameworks related to human development, particularly regarding youth. The objective of developmental science is to explain, describe and enhance the transformation of individuals across the lifespan (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselrode, 1977). Developmental systems are theoretical models that comprise the theoretical framework of developmental science (Overton, 2010).

Lerner et al. (2011) contended that while these developmental process models are related to concepts of human development, there is a lack of clarity on how these models, including Damon's (2008) study of the purpose, previously discussed in this chapter, informs explicitly the philosophical approaches to and implementation of PYD programming. Consequently, Lerner et al. (2011) discussed the integration of these development process models to strengthen the transition from theory to practice in youth development programs: (a) The Study of Adolescence within the Developmental System, (b) Study of Purpose (discussed previously in this section), (c) Study of Development Assets, (d) Study of Stage-Environment Fit and Motivation, (e) Study of Motivation, Active Engagement, and Real-Life Challenges, (f) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), (g) Positive Adolescent-to-Adult Transitions, (h) Study of Resilience, and (i) Study of Individual Context Relational Processes and PYD.

The Study of Adolescence within the developmental system addresses the adolescent transformational process through the physical and physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels to the social-relational and institutional-organizational levels (Lerner et al., 2011). Suppose the ability to adapt and overcome challenges is fostered in youth either independently or within the context of their connected social capital support system, such as their family, peer group, school, and community. In that case, their chances of manifesting healthy development are bolstered. Thus, all youth have assets to build on to increase their ability to

thrive (Gestsdottir and Lerner, 2008). According to Freund and Baltes (2002), an individual's ability to choose goals that display their purpose in life, and utilize critical thinking and intentional behavior, such as identifying resources, fosters their ability to realize their purpose while activating their ability to adjust to and surmount obstacles effectively.

As previously discussed, Damon's (2008) study of purpose captures the notion of youth superseding their own self-focused needs to pursue a mission that considers the welfare of the world beyond themselves. Lerner et al. (2008) provide an operational criterion of Damon's study:

- The person must encompass all elements of the description of the purpose, including something to accomplish, a beyond-the-self philosophy, an action plan for the actualization of the goal, a purpose meaningful to self, and a purpose that denotes self-identity.
- The purpose must determine and organize the person's actions and decisions to support the actualization of the purpose.
- The person must envision themselves operating an exhausting effort to actualize the purpose.

Lerner et al. (2011) noted that the opportunity for a deeper understanding of Damon's (2008) Study of Purpose is to examine whether youth's pursuit of purpose as the contribution is for self-serving reasons and social approval or is their ultimate vision of their life's purpose.

The study of Developmental Assets refers to the individual or internal assets or skills, competencies, and values that characterize a youth (Benson et al., 2011). Benson (2008) organized these assets into four categories, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity while promoting them as representations of the talents,

strengths, constructive interests, and stimulants in every youth. Furthermore, Benson et al. (2011) contended that thriving in youth is maximized with their forces aligned with the assets of their community and social capital support system. Benson et al. (2011) organized the community and social capital support system assets into four categories: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The development assets depicted in this study have been researched as a conceptual framework describing the critical function of communities in augmenting PYD.

The Study of Stage-Environment Fit and Motivation centers on how a “fit” between the social capital aspects in a youth’s life, such as schools, families, and youth development programming, and individual characteristics, such as expectations, values, and self-esteem, contributes to PYD (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This study examined the transitions of early and middle adolescents to junior high school and their participation in youth development programming. Subsequently, it was shown that schools and youth development programs must have a developmental alignment to motivate youth and foster their PYD. Utilizing this model, attributes were highlighted that better undergird a youth’s expectations for academic and life achievements, such as teacher’s expectations and opportunities for organized after-school programming (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

The Study of Motivation, Active Engagement, and Real-Life Challenges (Larson, 2006) depicts that for positive development to happen in youth, they must become motivated and remain engaged in their development while enduring challenges that arise in real life. Larson (2006) underscored the concept of self-initiative, the capacity to direct cumulative effort over time toward achieving a long-term goal, which serves as a critical aspect of PYD and should be a key focus for youth development programs that foster PYD. Larson (2000) argues that out-of-

school-time (OST) youth development programs provide youth opportunities to bolster self-initiative by engaging in leadership development, team building, and conflict resolution. Lerner et al. (2011) noted that OST activities might be associated with negative experiences, such as inappropriate adult interaction, negative influences, social isolation, and negative group dynamics, which Larson's work seeks to address.

The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological System Theory (PVEST) (Spencer, 2006) focuses on examining development through consideration of structural factors, cultural influences, and individual experiences, along with an individual's view of these aspects (Spencer, 2006). Lerner et al. (2011) noted that this dynamic and systemic framework emphasizes how youth understand their environmental context and how this understanding factors into their perceptions of people, events, and opportunities in their contextual reality. Moreover, the PVEST model has centered on minority youth and how they assess themselves based on negative stereotypes and biases of others, especially in stress-filled and high-risk contexts.

Spencer (2006) contended that youth from varied backgrounds would experience the same events and environmental settings through various worldviews, thus producing varied interpretations and implications. For example, an after-school homework club may bolster academic performance for one demographic of youth but may elicit a negative response based on previous lack of resources and access. The PVEST model asserts that the functionality of coping strategies that youth formulate in varied environments informs their developmental processes. Ultimately, structural racism and inequality must be examined within the approach to PYD (Spencer, 2006).

The notion of Positive Adolescent-to-Adult Transitions (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2009) centers on development processes captured in programming addressing adolescent to adult transitions, such as the school-to-work transition and adult responsibility development. Lerner et al. (2006) defined transition to adulthood as the shifts in social roles, as adolescents transition from being dependent upon adults to building the capacity to care for themselves and others; this transition is dictated by the environmental contexts of youth, including family, school, work, and society. The Positive Adolescent-to-Adult model addresses the dilemmas endured by youth as they connect the concept of education to work by promoting policy and programming frameworks to advance the school-to-work connection. Hamilton (1994) argued that youth who believe that their current actions aid them in accomplishing future achievements have a greater chance of intensifying their academic work ethic while exhibiting better decision-making.

The study of Resilience (Masten, 2001) focuses on positive and negative adaptive behavior in human developmental processes. According to Masten (2001), the notion of being resilient is characterized by an individual experiencing hardship and encompassing the ability to make a positive adaptation or developmental reaction. Determining what is considered positive adaptation hinges on competence in engaging age-specific developmental tasks (Masten, 2001; Masten et al., 2006). Therefore, the framework promotes that resiliency is a modifying concept based on how developmentally appropriate lessons shift through the individual's life span and their cultural context and background influence them. Masten (2001) contended that youth are not just identified as resilient based on the competence they garner because of overcoming developmental tasks but also because of the potency of resources they have access to.

The Study of Individual-Contextual Relational Processes and PYD (Lerner et al., 2005) identifies the individual and contextual connections that foster PYD and link to decreased high-

risk behaviors. This study characterizes youth thriving as conceptualizing the 5 Cs of PYD (discussed previously in this section)-*competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring* (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Lerner et al. (2011) contended that PYD is promoted by mutually beneficial relationships between the youth and their community/social capital assets. Thus thriving youth should be positively engaged in contributing to their community and the world outside of them while being less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors.

According to Hamilton (1999), the second characteristic of PYD is that it is a philosophy or approach to youth development programming. Building on the research that discusses how human development science processes inform youth development, Lerner et al. (2011) highlighted examples of scholarship addressing PYD as an approach or philosophy to youth development programming. Eccles and Gootman (2002) conducted a study that produced four domains of individual assets that promote PYD within youth development programming:

1. Physical development
2. Intellectual development
3. Psychological development
4. Social development

These domains are best optimized for PYD when accompanied by a community of social capital that facilitates the developmental processes while providing access to enriching experiences, positive people, supportive contexts, and empowerment-based skill-building. Youth development facilitators should seek input and perspectives from the families and communities of the youth served when planning, designing, and evaluating youth development programming (Eccles and Gootman, 2002).

Other approaches or philosophies have emerged to inform effective PYD in youth programming. Catalano et al. (2002, 2004) attributed structured curriculum, measured reductions in problematic behaviors, and elevated positive behavior output as effective youth development programming indicators. Moreover, Catalano et al. (2004) argued that youth programming maximized its effectiveness when at least 5 of 15 positive behavior outputs were promoted, including bonding, resilience, social competence, emotional competence, cognitive competence, behavioral competence, moral competence, self-determination, spirituality, self-efficacy, clear and positive identity, belief in the future, recognition for positive behavior, opportunities for prosocial involvement, and prosocial norms.

Understanding Youth Development Programming

To inform the promotion of PYD in youth programming, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) examined community-based programs to understand the terminology “youth development program.” Subsequently, the aspects of specific program activities, atmosphere, and goals were identified. Program activities facilitate chances for youth to engage in new challenges and increase active participation. The atmosphere of a youth development program provides the environment and context to foster PYD. The objectives or goals of youth development programs extend beyond preventing problem behaviors but encompass the maximization of PYD (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

With a similar objective to Roth & Brooks-Gunn (2003), Blum (2003) highlighted the components of people, contributions, activities, and place as imperative to effective youth development, precisely, the notion of youth interventions. Strong youth and adult connections (people), active engagement of youth re-investing time and efforts back into family and community (contributions), opportunities for recreation and productivity (activities), and a safe

environment with adult oversight (place) contribute to viable youth interventions. Lerner (2004) galvanizes the work of Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) and Blum (2003) by extending that these models contribute to a larger framework of fundamental characteristics that inform effective PYD programming, identified as the “Big Three”:

1. Positive and sustained adult-youth relations, relations (relations between youth and competent, caring, and consistent adults for at least a period of a year, such as coach, mentor, or teacher)
2. Life-skill building activities
3. Opportunities for youth engagement in activities that contribute to family, school, and community advancement

These aspects must be present in youth development programs to maximize effective PYD (Lerner, 2004).

The 5Cs of PYD—*competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring*, discussed earlier in this section, provide practicality to understanding the developmental elements necessary to bolster youth thriving, a foremost model utilized within the youth development field (Lerner et al., 2005). While the 5C’s model, developmental processes, philosophical approaches, and evaluation measures of effectiveness that inform the promotion of PYD is linked to favorable outcomes in youth development programs, the notion that these constructs are universally applicable to youth demographics is yet to be empirically supported (Lerner et al., 2011 & Heck and Subramaniam, 2009). To support the objective of this study, it is pertinent to examine the applicability of PYD to the cultural context of Black youth empowerment in the next section.

Empowerment-Based Approach to Positive Youth Development for Black Youth

The asset-based approach promoted through the 5Cs philosophy in the PYD model is a supported construct among Black youth development scholars, as it counters the narratives of negative stereotypes and deficit-based rhetoric inundated in the literature investigating Black youth. Travis and Leech (2014) argued that while the 5Cs PYD model is promising in advancing Black youth development, the contextual framework of the 5Cs approach may fail to be sufficient for optimization in the ecological context of Black youth. The dynamics of systemic racism that continues to affect Black community settings compromise the effectiveness of the 5Cs framework to forward individual and cultural assets in Black youth while providing culturally competent strategies to maximize Black youth and communities (Washington & Johnson, 2012). Consequently, this section in the literature review engages scholarship that addresses the nuanced realities impacting Black youth developmental processes, particularly: (a) Empowerment-Based PYD for Black Youth and (b) African-Centered PYD philosophies.

The notion of empowerment is characterized as a strength or asset-based construct that centers on gaining and galvanizing knowledge, skills, and resources to foster transformation at the individual, community pragmatically, and organizational levels (Ausberger et al., 2019). Moreover, empowerment has been related to the exertion of power, socio-political and socio-economic liberation, and collective voice (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2015). Lardier (2018) argued that empowerment serves as a critical lens and framework for understanding the emergent roles and actions of Black youth in combating continued oppression and marginalization to bolster community change. Consequently, the social inequities that constitute the need for community transformation in Black community settings cannot be ignored in examining the impetus for an empowerment-based approach to PYD for Black youth (Christens & Peterson, 2012; Lardier, 2018; Travis & Leech, 2014).

According to Travis and Leech (2014), the promotion of PYD in Black youth must include the examination of structural barriers that often influence the developmental process. The researchers identify these structural barriers as social inequalities in three general categories: (a) socio-economic inequality, (b) access to resources, and (c) institutionalization.

The persistent perpetuation of systemic oppression and racism, from the enslavement of people of African descent and Jim Crow to modern-day discriminatory practices in housing policies and mass incarceration, continue to impact the ecological contexts of Black youth, particularly their socio-economic status (Alexander, 2011; Arya, N., & Augarten, 2008; Grills, 2016; Wacquant, 2001). While the scope of the socio-economic condition of Black families and communities does not reflect a monolithic status, a wealth gap remains incessant between Black youth and other racial groups (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 2011). As approximately 26% of Black youth are considered in poverty, impoverished conditions contribute to adverse outcomes that intensify stress in Black youth, such as negatively affecting their self-esteem, identity, physiological well-being, and overall development process, thus affecting future economic pursuits (Sweet, 2010; Tyler et al., 2020).

Black families are more likely to reside in lower-income communities than other groups, increasing environmental risks such as environmental hazards, violence, compromised institutional resources, and diminished exposure to healthy nutrition and lifestyles (Fry & Taylor, 2012; Lewis et al., 2005). Black youth in these settings are often inundated with the prevalence of food deserts, hazardous pollution waste sites, limited healthcare facility access, and limited access to economic centers for employment and opportunities (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2003; Bullard, 1990; Lewin-Epstein, 1986). Travis and Leech (2014) contended that a critical resource structural barrier that Black youth in these settings often endure is low school quality. Low

academic expectations, cultural incompetency, discriminative disciplinary actions, and inequities in school funding affect the academic achievement of Black youth and involves their overall developmental process.

Alexander (2011) argued that Black people, particularly in the United States, are disproportionately overrepresented in the American criminal justice system. The disproportionate disciplinary policies in schools contribute to the overrepresentation of Black youth in the juvenile justice system. Subsequently, this dynamic results in Black youths becoming adults in these institutions, deemed as the proverbial “school to prison pipeline” or “pipeline to prison” (Fabelo et al., 2011; Kim & Geronimo, 2009; Losen, 2011). According to Arya & Augarten (2008), Black youth account for approximately 30% of the youth arrested while only representing 17% of the youth population in the United States. Moreover, Black youth are nine times more likely to be sentenced as adults. The institutionalization of Black youth, families, and communities heightens the risk factors that Black youth must navigate to achieve thriving.

Socio-economic inequalities, lack of access to resources, and institutionalization represent structural barriers for many Black youths. Travis and Leech (2014) contended that 5Cs PYD constructs must be reinforced into a culturally relevant empowerment-based model to increase its viability in positively influencing Black youth’s ability to overcome these obstacles and actualize their full potential, thus necessitating the forwarding of the empowerment-based positive youth development approach (EMPYD).

Each element of the Five C model-*competence, confidence, connection, caring, character*- when applied as a singular aspect, posits the potential to affect Black youth positively; however, understanding the elements as interrelated, interdependent, and recursive constructs magnifies the facilitation of fostering resilience in Black youth despite their racial,

social and economic contexts (Lee et al., 2011; Swanson et al., 2002; Travis and Leech, 2014). Travis and Leech (2014) contended that in the EMPYD model, the Five C elements are synergistically collaborated to produce grander developmental concepts that augment increased sustainability in Black youth empowerment. The interactive relationship between *connection*, *caring*, and *character* fosters the notion of *moral identity*. Travis and Leech (2014) noted that the indicators related to *caring* are harmonic with health *connections*, while *caring* also links to a *character* or moral behavior. Moreover, *connection* and *character* strengthen each other. The characteristic encompasses the notion of *caring*, and *character* formulates the proverbial concept of *morality*, while *morality* has an interdependent relationship with *connections* that collectively bolster moral identity in Black youth (Baumert, 2012; Decety, 2011; Hurd et al., 2009).

Travis and Leech (2014) further contended that the interdependent relationship between the Five C PYD elements- *connection*, *confidence*, and *competence* produces a reinforced conception of development in Black youth, *mastery*. The notion of *mastery* in the EMPYD approach strengthens the pathway for Black youth's transitional period into stable adulthood by bolstering skill-building and proficiency (Lee et al., 2011). Gaylord-Harden et al. (2018) noted that increased self-esteem in Black youth directly correlates with substantial social capital and support systems, such as parents, teachers, extended family, and mentors. Moreover, increased self-esteem fosters confidence which elevates levels of resiliency necessary for Black youth to endure learning processes to reach mastery in academic and skill-building areas that propel them toward thriving (Trask-Tate et al., 2010).

To expand the EMPYD developmental model for Black youth, Travis and Leech (2014) promoted the integration of a sixth and seventh C PYD element, *sense of community*, and *active and engaged citizenship* into the 5Cs model. Similarly, Grills et al. (2016) argued that the

effective empowerment of Black youth necessitates prioritizing the aspect of *community building* as a competency, like the element of *contribution* discussed previously in the PYD section of this literature review. Initiatives such as the Black Youth Project and African American Male Engagement are highlighted in the literature as examples of developmental programming efforts that optimize the cultural assets of Black youth through Black community leadership development. The strengthened sense of moral identity and mastery is directly correlated to an elevated sense of community and actively engaged citizenship.

Travis and Leech (2014) contended that the galvanized integration of 5C elements to produce the more significant concepts of moral identity and mastery, along with the addition of a *sense of community* and *active and engaged citizenship*, culminate in the EMPYD model, which promotes culturally relevant programming to address the unique contexts of Black youth. Travis (2013) notes that the concept of empowerment facilitates an intersection between community and citizenship as “the process by which adolescents develop the consciousness, skills, and power necessary to envision personal or collective well-being.” In sum, Travis and Leech (2014) argued that the effectiveness of EMPYD is amplified in the context of a masterful community characterized by empowerment-based social capital and resources.

African-Centered PYD Approach

The literature previously discussed in this chapter regarding social capital, the PYD 5Cs model, and the EMPYD model informs the developmental work about Black youth. However, Travis and Leech (2014) argue that while the EMPYD model holds more fervent applicability to promoting PYD in Black youth, the pertinent role that racial identity plays in advancing culturally relevant Black youth development work should not be ignored. To bolster

understanding related to the influence of racial identity in Black youth empowerment, this section will examine literature engaging the notion of the African-centered PYD approach.

Youth development programs that promote PYD approaches for Black youth often fail to implement frameworks that consider the unique cultural context (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015; Lateef, 2020; Lateef, 2021; Pratt-Clarke, 2013; Travis & Leech, 2014). Lateef (2020) contended that alternately, most PYD programs utilize universal frameworks formulated to address all races and ethnicities, which neglects the necessity for specialized strategies to optimize the development of Black youth. According to (Cross, 2003), the social inequities plaguing Black communities have permeated into historical and systemic degradation within these settings, including substandard education, recreational spaces, housing, and racism. Many Black youths must navigate these conditions while often grappling to understand how their racial and ethnic identity factors into these disparities (Grill et al., 2016).

Lateef (2020) noted that because of these persistent circumstances impacting Black youth, Black community activists, scholars, and other stakeholders have vigorously pursued the formulation of culturally relevant frameworks and approaches to equip Black youth with tools to navigate their conditions and thrive. Black leaders during the 1960s, particularly those who subscribed to Pan-Africanist thought, such as Kwame Touré (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael, contended that African Americans or Black people in America, once referred to as “American Negroes,” belong to the diaspora of people of African descent and shared a distinct cultural relationship with the African continent (Carmichael, 1969). Furthermore, this period marked an emergence of activism among Black youth and college students, which ignited the Black Studies movement on campuses across the United States with Black community support. In conjunction with other movements, these historical events set the context for fostering the

African-centered paradigm to support the advancement of Black people, particularly Black youth.

According to Asante (1980), African-centered thought or Afrocentricity characterizes a model focused on the notion that people of African descent should take ownership of their agency and development to garner liberation in the ecological context of systemic oppression. Furthermore, the African-centered paradigm promotes Black people centralizing their interpretation of their historical and current life experiences and developmental processes through their worldview instead of the Euro-centric constructs that have historically inundated mainstream culture (Asante, 2003; Jamison, 2020). Woodson (1990) contended that the disconnect between Black people and their knowledge of their distinct racial and ethnic history and identity has contributed to their political, economic, social, and educational deficiencies. Therefore, the African-centered youth development paradigm fosters the opportunity for the reconnection of Black youth to their racial and ethnic identity and guides their developmental process to navigate their political, economic, social, and educational contexts. According to Lloyd and Williams (2017), a positive correlation has been shown between the utilization of African-centered youth development methods and strengthened levels of self-esteem, racial identity, positive self-perception, academic and behavioral performance, and anti-drug attitudes.

Lateef (2020) compared the 5C's PYD model (previously discussed in this chapter) and a prominent African-centered paradigm utilized in Black youth development, Nguzo Saba. Nguzo Saba, a Swahili term meaning seven principles, is often associated with the African American holiday, Kwanzaa. These principles include:

- Umoja, which means faith
- Kujichagulia, which means self-determination

- Ujima, which means collective work and responsibility
- Ujamaa, which means cooperative economics
- Nia, which means purpose
- Kuumba, which means creativity
- Imani, which means faith

Maulana Karenga developed the Nguzo Saba framework in 1966 as a guide for addressing the issues affecting communities across the African diaspora, particularly the systemic inequities plaguing Black communities in America (Karenga, 1989). To aid Black youth in better navigating these realities, the Nguzo Saba framework for Black youth development was undergirded with cultural values that: (a) are Pan-African in nature, thus concerned with issues affecting Black communities across the diaspora; (b) bolster the objective to liberate and building Black communities; (c) is characterized by cultural and spiritual significance for people of African descent; and (d) should be feasible to foster the mission of sharing and teaching (Karenga, 1989, pp. 43-44).

Furthermore, Karenga provided theoretical objectives to support cultural value concepts to emulate the needs and aims of Black community settings:

- Organizing and enriching the relationships between African Americans
- Establishing standards of commitment and priorities to enhance the well-being of the African American community
- Affirming the African heritage within the African American community
- Serving as a core system of communitarian, ethical values for the guidance of the community, particularly for children; and

- Assisting in developing human beings who individually participate in the positive development of the African American community and humanity at large (Karenga, 1989, p. 44)

The collaboration of these cultural value concepts and theoretical objectives within the Nguzo Saba framework for youth development has been proven to promote heightened self-esteem, increased positive knowledge of African and African American history and culture while bolstering positive social skills in Black youth (Belgrave et al., 2004; Pratt-Clarke, 2013; Steptau-Watson & Tolliver, 2018).

While both the 5Cs PYD and the African Centered Nguzo Saba frameworks promote a strengths-based approach to PYD, thus rejecting the notion of negatively labeling youth, along with other similarities, there are contrasts in the methodologies that highlight the cultural distinctions of Black youth development from universal PYD (Karenga, 1989; Lerner et al., 2005). Lateef (2020) noted that while the Five Cs framework is like Nguzo Saba in that it promotes aspirational values, character development, community connection, and reciprocal relationship building, it fails to directly address the cultural concepts concerning cultural heritage, spirituality, and resilience. Moreover, the notion of self-esteem within the Five Cs PYD approach is promoted primarily as an individual or intrinsic value. The African-centered approach views self-esteem as a collective aspect in which youth should encourage and nurture collective esteem and efficacy (Karenga, 1989; Lerner et al., 2005). According to Lateef (2020), prioritizing collective development over isolated self-esteem fosters the opportunity for Black youth to strengthen their sense of value in other members of their community while experiencing a natural result of self-esteem and self-worth because of their sense of value in their community. Lastly, the perspective of developing competence among youth differs between the approaches.

While the Five Cs PYD approach primarily discusses competence as an individual value in childhood, the African-centered process promotes an interdependent relationship between members in Black communities as a shared responsibility to strengthen a collective competence, which is evident in the Nguzo Saba principles, including Umoja, meaning unity, Ujima, meaning collective work and responsibility, and Ujamaa, meaning cooperative economics (Karenga, 1989; Lerner et al., 2005).

The principles promoted through African-centered approaches are pertinent in Black youth development efforts to combat the notion of miseducation endured by this demographic, particularly about the learning of Black history (Johnson, 2016; Lateef, 2020; Pratt-Clarke, 2013). Black youth, particularly in the United States, are often relegated to learning the historical narrative of people of African descent beginning in 1619 as “slaves,” as opposed to exploring the ecology of African civilizations that predate the enslavement of African people (Degruy, 2017; Gibbons, 1994). When Black youth are enveloped with Euro-centric content in their educational process, it boosts their interests in philosophy, history, and other matters regarding White people, while often sacrificing competence in their cultural history and self-interests (Akbar, 2008). Consequently, the mainstream paradigm contributes to the engagement of Black youth in high-risk behaviors that hinder self-actualization and their contribution to Black community transformation (Gibbons, 1994; Ginwright, 2004, Johnson, 2016; Lateef, 2021; Lateef, 2020).

Johnson (2016) forwarded a study of an African-centered youth development program, Kamili Ville. Kamili Ville engages Black youth twice per week, with the primary aim of bolstering self-actualization and a sense of liberation. Furthermore, the program provides cultural field trips, traditional African dance lessons, and Swahili language development, which

contribute to youth nurturing a healthy self-perception and identifying distinct purposes in their lives. Johnson reports that Black youth engaged in this African-centered program displayed:

- an increase in the competency of African history
- a boost in positive racial and cultural esteem
- an increase in self and racial pride
- a strengthened sense of self-confidence
- a bolstered sense of family and community
- positive emotional development

Johnson (2016) concluded that while African centered youth development programs do not provide a quick fix solution for inequitable educational settings, sustained intentional implementations of developmental efforts that allow opportunities for Black youth to explore explicit cultural and racial knowledge advance the cultivation of healthy educational, social, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual growth.

Black Facilitators of Black Youth Empowerment

The implementation of youth development initiatives to aid the developmental process of Black youth in the United States has been implemented since the late 18th century. However, the proliferation of structural racism and oppression in America exacerbated the need for Black adults to foster the capacity of Black youth to navigate discriminatory practices. Theriault (2018) noted that even before Plessy v. Ferguson legalized segregation, particularly in the State context, Black youth endured acts of violence and harassment, inequitable facilities, and unfair social norms to engage in youth development opportunities. Consequently, these oppressive acts against Black youth minimized their participation in programs facilitated by Government, non-profits, or other non-Black entities (Halpern, 2002).

Before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865, the facilitation of development efforts for Black youth in the United States existed. Enslaved African families guided Black youth in bolstering positive identity, and strong moral and spiritual values through family interaction, despite facing oppressive conditions (Mintz, 1999; Raboteau, 2004). Furthermore, extended families, also referred to as kinship networks (Hahn, 2003), were facilitators of Black youth development. The long hours often worked by enslaved Black parents jeopardized the sustained nurturance of their children (Illick, 2005; Raboteau, 2004). These kinship networks were often also responsible for facilitating practical skill development and exposure to oral traditions, religion, and history while instilling a sense of respect and community in Black youth (Gutman, 1987).

As a result of enslaved African people being mandated to labor on adjoining plantations and laws that dictated that Black children belonged to their mother's owner, kinship networks often evolved beyond plantation boundaries taking on community-based contexts referred to as neighborhoods (Therriault, 2018). While neighborhood constructs were characterized by instability due to the potentiality of enslaved Africans being sold, they provided an environment for socialization and a sense of place and belonging that contributed to positive development for Black youth. Pathways for youth development, such as literacy development, which strengthened self-esteem, and learning to hunt and utilize medicinal plants for survival, were often promoted in enslaved African neighborhood constructs (Glave, 2011; King, 2011).

The development of Black youth persisted into the Reconstruction era as the concept of Black communities or neighborhoods expanded after the American Civil War. While the proliferation of violence against Black people continued with the increase of lynching by mobs to terrorize and enforce segregation, many Black kinship networks or communities facilitated the

educational processes for Black youth (Floyd and Mowatt, 2014; Theriault, 2018). However, with the denial of many newly Freed Black people and forced labor law mandates placed on many Black children, both the uniting of biological families and gaining of supportive income were often negated, relegating Black kinship networks to continue forging opportunities for Black youth development. Consequently, schools, churches, and childcare support were constructed in Black community settings as spaces to cultivate the development of Black youth (Jackson Jr., 2005). Not only did Black community members in these settings formulate spaces to foster positive self-identity, leadership skills, and a sense of community in Black youth, but they also volunteered time and resources to construct educational institutions and teach (Jackson Jr., 2005; Mitchell, 2008). While Black families viewed extensive efforts to educate Black children as opportunities to stay informed, gain employment, and boost protection against labor contract exploitation, many White entities perceived it as a threat to White Supremacy (Mitchell, 2008).

The Jim Crow Era, which was characterized by ongoing violence against Black people, encompassed a great migration of Black families to the northern cities in hopes of escaping racial terrorism. Many migrant families settled into predominantly Black neighborhoods, while often, the persistence of low economic status, racial violence, and segregation policies aggravated poor living conditions within these settings (Woodward, 1974). Consequently, issues such as poor health, high mortality, and juvenile delinquency elevated as mainstream efforts to institute parks and playgrounds ignored Black youth. At the same time, Whites often used violence to prevent Black youth from participating in these spaces (Franklin and Moss, 1994). Black facilitators of Black youth development and education, such as in settlement houses, Black churches, and

schools, persisted in offering Black youth opportunities to engage in recreational, religious, and educational activities.

The decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* of 1954, which mandated the integration of Black youth into White schools, exacerbated the need for distinct approaches to guiding the thriving of Black youth, as Black teachers, staff, pedagogy, and curriculum significant to their development were not integrated into White school contexts (Lateef, 2020). Thus, in the 1960s, Black community members, activists, and scholars contributed to developing and facilitating culturally relevant approaches to Black youth development to increase their capacity to navigate the social and environmental inequities persistent in American society (Grills et al., 2016; Lateef, 2021). The facilitation of Black youth empowerment translated into the formulation of community-based out-of-school, African-centered rites of passage and independent educational programs often led by Black organizations such as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and other Black Nationalist and Pan-African organizations (Garcha, 2019).

According to Baldrige (2018), the need for community-based Black youth program facilitators continues to persist as inequities in educational practices and community development continue, such as discriminatory disciplinary actions against Black students and gentrification in Black community settings. Consequently, Black youth program facilitators often fill various roles to guide the development of Black youth in these contexts, such as advocating, educating, mentoring, counseling, mediating, and negotiating. While facilitators of Black youth empowerment often maintain critical relationships with Black youth, they are often underutilized and undervalued in school settings, but their voices and experiences are also often negated from discourse and policy regarding the development of Black youth (Fusco, 2012; Ginwright, 2007).

Black youth empowerment program facilitators are positioned to optimize their impact on Black youth to strengthen the social capital support for Black youth while bolstering political, social, and cultural identity development among Black youth (Fusco, 2012; Ginwright, 2007). Ginwright (2009) contended that because Black youth empowerment facilitators operate primarily outside the school context, they often gain a distinct privilege of knowing the daily obstacles youth face at home, school, and community settings. Thus, community-based Black youth program facilitators have insight that is used to help Black youth, particularly in marginalized conditions, by boosting academic achievement, building social capital, increasing social awareness, and contributing to the facilitation of organizing efforts that influence community transformation (Akom, 2006; Ginwright, 2007; Kwon, 2013). Baldrige (2018) advanced the notion that to provide a comprehensive understanding of the overall pedagogical and agency impact of community-based Black youth empowerment facilitators operating in community settings; they should be conceptualized as community-based educators leading youth empowerment in community-based educational spaces.

Summary & Gap

This chapter examined literature addressing areas of research that edifies approaches to developing Black youth, including social capital for Black youth development, positive youth development approach, empowerment-based positive youth development for Black youth, and African-centered positive youth development. Furthermore, research is addressed that highlights Black facilitators of Black youth programming as essential contributors to the development of marginalized populations of Black youth. However, a gap remains in the research that explores the perceptions of lived experiences of Black facilitators of Black youth empowerment programming and how those experiences inform their approach to their work with Black youth

populations. As a Black youth empowerment programming leader, I provided critical reflection and insight into how experiences as a former Black youth in a primarily Black community setting influenced my journey and approach to engaging in Black youth empowerment work in this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

“I have been preparing for this moment my whole life; thus, my whole life has prepared me for this moment.”

This autoethnographic study aimed to explore the influences and experiences that informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming. The research questions for this study are: (1) How did external forces and people inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming? (2) How did my inner drive and consciousness inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming? (3) How does a critique of power, privileges, and oppressions of my experiences inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming? Through an arts-based autoethnography study, I provided insight into the possibilities of creating Black spaces where Black youth can thrive as people, students, and future community leaders.

The following sections of this chapter discuss the (a) paradigm and philosophical underpinnings, (b) epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions, (c) research design, (d) research approach, (e) data generation, (f) data analysis, (g) trustworthiness, and (h) summary.

Philosophical Underpinnings

The purpose of providing the research paradigm in this study is to examine the systematic inquiry, examination, and clarification in ways to be understood by examining reality, knowledge, and values (Matney, 2019). The research paradigm is based on assumptions through philosophical underpinnings: (1) epistemology, (2) ontology, (3) axiology, and (4) praxis. The epistemology in the research paradigm is concerned with the justification of knowledge and truth

and can be described as “how we gain knowledge of what we know” (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018, Edwards, 2012). Aigen (1995) notes that epistemology also seeks to understand what types of knowledge are possible, adequate, and legitimate. Epistemology helps researchers position themselves to discuss assumptions about the process of knowledge generation while articulating diverse ways of understanding effectiveness, efficacy, and impact shown in study findings (Matney, 2018).

Ontology in the research paradigm is concerned with what exists in the world in which humans can acquire knowledge. Killam (2013) notes that ontology addresses beliefs about real or genuine and what can be discovered about reality. The Axiological branch in the research paradigm centers on the nature of what the researchers perceive as valuable and ethical, which guides the researcher’s decision in the research process (Killam, 2013). The notion of praxis considers the philosophy research utilized to guide and conduct the research process with the reflection and action needed to examine the phenomenon (Brown, 2004).

I approached the research methodology of this study from a Black Liberation Theory (BLT) epistemology and ontology lens. Black liberation theory is characterized by the history of people of African descent engrossing in developmental or educational processes that are culturally relevant to foster their ability to empower their communities while combating systemic oppression and racism (King, 2017). Black liberation centers on Black community settings and members within those settings, such as Black youth, as a starting point for engaging theory, inquiry, methodology, and pedagogy in the educational and developmental experience (King, 2017; Zamlin, 2018). Thus, BLT centers on the internalization of social responsibility in community stakeholders to utilize gained knowledge and skills to enhance racial, social justice and engage in Black community transformation through organized efforts, such as the effort of

aiding Black youth to actualize their potential and utilize their actualization to engage in critical Black community transformative actions (Baxley et al., 2021; King, 2017; Kobe, 2018, Harris, 1992).

According to Harris (1992), the notion of Black liberation encompasses an Afrocentric or African-centered epistemological orientation that centralizes the motivation for Black people to achieve the concepts of freedom, the ability to experience the world in ways continuous to one's idealized historical understanding, and literacy, along with the application of historical knowledge as the confluence between personality and situation dictates. The Afro-centric orientation of BLT positions it as a research paradigm that challenges traditional Euro-centric research practices that are often culturally irrelevant to people of African descent (Asante, 1990, Reviere, 2001). According to Asante (1990), researchers that approach research paradigms characterized by Afrocentric philosophy, such as BLT, must be responsible for exposing covert racially insensitive theories infused into current methodologies, work to bolster validity for African values in research paradigms, and maintain research grounded in the interpretation of place. The notion of "place" is contextualized as a fundamental framework of African-centered intellectual inquiry, which allows the researcher to centralize the values of Black people being examined while analyzing and critiquing Eurocentric research paradigms that may jeopardize accurate interpretation of their lived experiences (Asante, 1990).

Research Design

A qualitative design was utilized to investigate my perceptions to understand what influences informed my leadership in facilitating Black youth empowerment programming. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore an issue from a deeper perspective by investigating those who have primarily experienced the issue (Stelter, 2010). According to

Trainor and Leko (2014), qualitative research is not only an essential aspect of scholarship across all areas of research. Still, it is pertinent to investigate issues related to human lived experiences within social sciences. The qualitative research approach allows the researcher to account for complexities and culturally relevant meanings expressed in the study participants' narratives of the problem being examined, thus providing thick descriptions (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2010). Qualitative research design fostered the opportunity for me to formulate descriptive narratives regarding my lived experiences which inform why and how I engage in my position as a Black youth empowerment facilitator.

Autoethnography Methodology

The qualitative methodology for this study was autoethnography, which is the practice of deliberately and self-consciously examining a researcher's identity to understand or represent a phenomenon that exceeds the notion of "self" (Butz & Besio, 2009). According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), postmodernism in the 1980s ushered in opportunities for social science reformation through reconceptualizing the aims and approach to social science research. Researchers began re-imagining how knowledge was constructed while associating it to their paradigms to represent the knowledge, thus advancing the desire to shift from universal narratives (Anderson, 2010; Barthes, 1977; Kuhn, 1996). Researchers adopted the autoethnographic research design as a response to scrutinization of the traditional perspectives on what research is and how it should be conducted while producing purposeful and accessible inquiry to engage readers in identity politic issues often hidden from the public. An autoethnographic approach further fostered the opportunity to deepen capacities for empathy for people from different lived experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Autoethnography combines characteristics of inquiry. According to Farrell (2016), autoethnography research has three orientation aspects: (a) ethnographic in methodological orientation, (b) cultural in interpretive orientation, and (c) autobiographical in origin. An ethnography is characterized by a researcher becoming a participant-observer in the cultural phenomena being examined and may interview cultural members while challenging their cultural norms and values (Lindquist, 2002). The cultural aspect of autoethnography centers on the ways of living being studied, such as a culture's relational practices, shared beliefs, values, and shared lived experiences (Maso, 2001). Finally, the autoethnography originates from the autobiographical approach, which is characterized by a researcher's illustration of "epiphanies" or remembered perceptions of lived experiences perceived to have transformative influence and reveal ways one could arbitrate critical circumstances and the aftermath of recollections, feelings, memories, and images produced by those situations (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin, 1989).

Autoethnography allows researchers to tell stories and advance narratives often denied in traditional research (Denzin, 2014). The selection of stories is based on data collection criteria and their significance to the purpose of the research study (Berry & Patti, 2015). Moreover, autoethnography research allowed me to illustrate ways of being, speaking, writing, and believing related to Black lived experiences. Thus, the autoethnographic approach allowed me to delve into the pivotal moments of my lived experiences and provide detailed descriptions of my journey from a Black youth in a predominantly Black community setting, attending predominantly Black schools to eventually finding myself in the middle of an Iraqi desert with an epiphany of an envisioned future for the generations of Black youth.

The data produced from this autoethnographic study is critical because the recollection of my experiences as a Black youth and young adult provides a reflective mirror for the context of Black youth development work to envision a thriving future for Black youth and Black community settings as a counternarrative to the deficit-based notions often associated with Black youth. Thus, there is purposeful selection in the narratives shared in this study through a complex lens that encompasses my experiences as a program facilitator and as a former Black youth, student, and now father to Black children. The autoethnography allowed memories to be utilized to bolster understanding through exposure to distinct accounts of lived experiences that may contribute to improved practices relating to Black youth empowerment. Consequently, autoethnography provided creative latitude to use the notion of epiphanies to strengthen this study (Denzin, 2014).

Art-based Research (ABR)

The terminology “art” and “artistic” emerged in academic research in the early 20th century. In contrast, the concept of scientifically defining “art” as research in counter to dualism and positivist notions of truth and science materialized in the second half of the 20th century (Barone & Eisner, 2006). ABR aims to strengthen the perspectives related to distinct human lived experiences while encompassing aesthetic qualities or design elements that integrate the research process with the text that illustrates the research activities (Barone & Eisner, 2006). According to Leavy (2009), ABR embodies a plethora of arts-informed approaches utilized by qualitative researchers at various stages of the research process to illustrate data generation, analysis, and representation. Barone and Eisner (2006) note genres of narrative construction and storytelling, which includes poetry, novellas, and short stories, educational connoisseurship, and criticism, which is art appreciation and criticism, and non-literary forms of art-based literature,

which includes painting, photography, collage, film, music, video, sculpture, and performance arts, among others are explicitly utilized in education research to suggest new ways of viewing phenomena, thus deepening understanding and continuous dialogue on often overlooked concepts.

ABR provides artistic opportunities to tell the lived experiences within their complex and contentious historical context. In other words, ABR allowed me to expose and share understandings of phenomena about Black lived experiences that are problematic in traditional research approaches while also providing counternarratives to deficit-based rhetoric within traditional research (Greenwood, 2012; Hanley, 2014). According to Banks-Wallace (2002), qualitative storytelling for Black researchers is rooted in oral African and African American traditions.

Storytelling is a reciprocal process of sharing stories between storytellers and story receivers, using oral mediums or sign language while fostering the articulation of hopes, fears, and dreams (Banks-Wallace, 1998; Klinger, 1997). Banks-Wallace (2002) notes that storytelling bolsters relationship building between storytellers and listeners through eliciting a “touchstone” effect that reminds people of standard and historical connections. Notably, for African American researchers, traditional African values, traditions, and rituals that survived the Middle Passage, the enslavement of African people, and continued injustices that persist, storytelling in ABR allow them to examine, compare, and express historical and cultural experiences while contributing to healing, nurturing and community building efforts. Thus, the selection of stories shared in this study is purposeful and narrated through a complex lens that encompasses the lived experiences of a Black youth empowerment program facilitator and as a youth, student, and father. ABR, in this study, allowed art-informed storytelling to be used to strengthen

understanding through the depiction of lived experiences that may enrich the community-based work supporting Black youth empowerment.

Arts-Based Autoethnographic Research

As the researcher conducting the autoethnographic research and ABR in this study, I focused my storytelling on encompassing literary aspects that foster the aims of activating analytical processes, such as setting, characters, elaboration, dialogue, clarity, scene, transitions, and voice (Denzin, 2014).

The collaboration of autoethnographic research and ABR supports the formulation of performative auto ethnographical writing (Sughrua, 2020). According to Swafford (2019), performative autoethnographic writing fosters the concept of writing to examine our epistemic, aesthetic, material, social, personal, and political selves or bodies. Moreover, performative writing is subjective as it is purposed to elicit an emotional reaction while also optimizing reflexive engagement between the text and its target audience (Pollock, 2007). Pelias (2005) contends that performative writing forwards lived experiences and expresses narratives of exemplary occurrences that summon human life complexities.

Utilizing an art-based autoethnographic approach also strengthens a researcher's opportunity to lead and affect social change. According to Forest (2009), autoethnography as a creative writing process can be a form of art-based analysis that bolsters reflective writing that evokes new knowledge, insight, and validation of phenomena. Consequently, identifying the voice that describes the inner perceptions of the researcher is a catalyst for translating inner visions into transformative social action (Forest, 2009). In this study, I used an art-based autoethnographic approach to enact creative storytelling to not only help readers deepen their understanding of how my critical reflections influenced my approach to leading Black youth

empowerment programming but also to formulate a vision of social change and community transformation with the potentiality to influence people to initiate or intensify Black youth empowerment efforts.

Methods and Procedures

The role of data sources in arts-based autoethnographic research is to provide public illustrations of the relationship between the self and the world being examined (Daphinee, 2010). Consequently, the data generated in the art-based autoethnographic approach is essential in allowing me to remember the lived experiences that inform the study intricately. To explore the influences and lived experiences that have informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming, I utilized data generation approaches data in this study: (a) critical reflective journaling, (b) photo-elicitation, (c) photo reflection.

First, using recollection, I composed self-reflective accounts. I entered them into a critical reflective journal guided by critical consciousness development theory, thus detailing my development process through CCD phases: critical reflection, critical agency, and critical action. Critical reflective journaling within autoethnographic research is focused on fostering the generation of a researcher's remembered lived experiences, particularly pivotal events and moments, while illustrating perceptions (Taliaferro, 2016). Furthermore, critical reflective journaling allowed me to describe the context associated with the lived experiences, including social and cultural contexts. In this study, I generated reflective data from my lived experience as a Black youth and adolescent in a primarily Black community setting. Furthermore, through reflective journaling, I captured my perceptions of pivotal events in my adulthood that informed the purpose of this study.

Each day of critical reflection, I designated time to reflect and write about rich experiences, observations, and challenges in growing up as a Black youth in an urban, primarily Black community. My reflection process started by identifying all my pivotal memories and was guided by the study's research questions. My first round of reflective journaling reflected my memories without external prompts or other participant-observers, only what I remember in isolation. I produced 12 reflective journals which explored 12 pivotal occurrences in my life. These journal entries covered the periods of my: (a) early to middle childhood years through the 1980s and (b) adolescent to early adulthood years through the 1990s and into the early and middle of the 2000s. While the reflective writing times varied each day, weekday and weekend mornings proved to be the most productive reflective writing times.

Next, to strengthen the critical reflective data generation process, I compiled external data, including twenty-seven photos as visual data, to elicit memories of lived experiences. According to Bukowski and Buetow (2011), photography in qualitative research stimulates new thoughts and provides visual records that evoke feelings and memories that necessitate articulation for the researcher. In this study, I reviewed photos depicting remembered moments in my lived experiences that inform the study's purpose through examining family photo archives that encompassed photos that cover my period as a Black youth growing up in an urban and primarily Black community. Furthermore, I conducted two field visits to my childhood community, Stop Six/Eastwood, and facilitated photo-elicitation research based on reflections formulated in the first round of critical reflective journaling.

Wang and Burris (1994) extend that the notion of photo reflection provides an opportunity for those who are inclusive members of the study setting to engage in "photo storytelling" or producing photo novellas. Furthermore, the photo novella in research fosters

mobility for analytical action and social change. In this study, photo reflections aided the formulation of creative narratives depicting my lived experiences as a photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), which serves as an educational tool to bolster knowledge to elevate the perspective and interpretation of my voice in this study in unique and meaningful ways, while also informing Black youth empowerment facilitation work. The photos were purposefully selected based on the literature reviewed in this study to support pivotal lived experiences and align with this study's purpose.

Third, I generated narrative data from others with the help of external data, including photos. Throughout my journey through my childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, along with my lived experiences in leading Black youth empowerment facilitation, other people have either been involved and observed my journey. Thus, to generate narrative data with others who were observers of my lived experiences, a critical reflective discussion was conducted with this observer by reviewing the photos depicting remembered moments in my lived experiences. Drawing from Freire's (2000) concept of culture circles, I collaborated with a participant observer of my journey as a Black youth into adulthood and a Black youth empowerment programming facilitator and engaged in analysis and dialogue of pivotal experiences. The other or participant-observer involved in the critical discussion was purposefully selected based on their involvement or observations of perceived pivotal memories critically reflected in this study. The generated data from approaches previously discussed are analyzed to detail the meanings of the data. Lastly, I performed a second round of critical reflective journaling to undergird and enhance memories elicited by photos and narrative perceptions of the other participant in the collaborative critique of power, privileges, and oppressions. Moreover, the second round of journaling focused on bolstering the discussion of the meaning applied to artistic expressions,

photo elicitations/reflections, and the critical discussion with Mama, detailed in the following chapter.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research centers on producing meanings beyond the bounds of the actual content of the formulated text (Charmaz, 2008). According to Rabinovich and Kacen (2013), the comparative method by researchers compares different categories and text with each other while describing the context that affects how the categories surface, sustain or change. Furthermore, the analysis identifies the connections between categories and describes the nature of the relationships. The researcher selects distinct categories that emerge in the data that most effectively depict what phenomena occur (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2013). In this study, the analysis focused on data generated through reflective journaling and narrative generation discussion, and photo-elicitation to explore the influences and lived experiences that have informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming. A codebook was constructed to provide organization, clarity, and coherence of data, thus discussing meanings, while the analysis of data aided the facilitation of thematic and sub-thematic recognition.

After completing the second round of reflective journaling, I coded the self-reflective data from the journal entries, elicited photos, and had. I had critical discussions with Mama to depict emerging themes, pertinent patterns, and categories. Moreover, I combined identified codes to inform the formulation of emergent themes. Next, I employed a strategic autoethnographic analysis (Chang, 2008):

- (1) Search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns;
- (2) look for cultural themes;
- (3) identify exceptional occurrences;
- (4) analyze inclusion and omission;
- (5) connect the present with the past;
- (6) analyze relationships between self and others;
- (7)

compare yourself with other people's cases; (8) contextualize broadly; (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; (10) frame with theories. (p. 131).

The literature reviewed in this study related to Black youth empowerment informed the data analysis process. Thus, I centered it on identifying themes sensitive to the study's central purpose of advancing Black youth empowerment work. Consequently, in the coding process, codes and themes related to contexts affecting the notions of social capital, PYD, Empowerment-based PYD for Black youth, African-centered PYD, and Black youth workers stood out. For example, in my early to middle childhood years through the 1980s in my primarily Black community, which was significantly affected by the influx of crack cocaine, I identified codes that described aspects of my community's context during that period, such as: (a) stigmas, (b) negative images, and (c) mainstream media. These codes, considered collaboratively, represented the concept of external factors that I explored in RQ1.

Furthermore, during this period, I identified the codes such as (a) Black youth, (b) Black families, and (c) escape. These codes considered collaboratively represented the notion of people I explored in RQ1. Subsequently, utilizing Chang's data analysis approach (2008), I contextualized these codes, applied this study's theoretical framework (CCD), and identified cultural themes distinct to Black community contexts, thus pinpointing themes such as (a) recognizing resilience, (b) navigating complex family contexts, and (c) extended eyes: protecting Black youth. Ultimately, this data analysis approach informed finding one, Black resilience, discussed in the following chapter.

Trustworthiness

The purpose of the research was to educate and advance knowledge in the field about this research activity while impacting society (Le Roux, 2017). Notably, a critical purpose of this study was to inform the areas of study concerning the development of Black youth. Another aim of this research study is to oppose traditional research practices; thus, trustworthiness issues require discussion.

According to Chang (2008), autoethnographic researchers understand that notion of memory recall has the potential to be errant, and storytelling is characterized as a version of the truth. Researchers who utilize autoethnographic inquiry extend that in any situation where language is used to depict memories, it may fail to fully exemplify the essence of the lived experiences being explored (Ellis and Bochner, 2011). Furthermore, memories can provoke intense emotional responses, complicating the autoethnographic researcher's decisions to depict the truth while also navigating how to optimally tell the story (Chang, 2008; Wall, 2008).

According to Le Roux (2017), storytellers may highlight elements of the narrative that reflect the self positively while minimizing or negating elements that reflect negative depictions. As the researcher in this study, I operated with intentionality to prioritize self-vulnerability and broad-mindedness to capture the truth of the lived experience regardless of how I am perceived.

However, I used discretion in the research process to protect individuals and entities involved in the narratives to promote authenticity in the study.

As discussed previously in this chapter, I approached this study from an Afro-centric or African centered lens, which requires me to uphold practices that address the critiques of autoethnography reliability, the credibility of the researcher, generalizability, and usefulness of data generation to impact and inform the field of study (Bochner & Ellis, 2000; Reviere, 2001): (a) view members of the community being explored as authorities is telling their story, (b)

maintaining a commitment to the outcomes of the research, (c) commitment to practicing justice and fairness to strengthen relationships within the community being explored, (d) viewing myself as included in the context of the community; not a separated entity, and (e) produce research that contributes to maintaining relationships between the community being explored and other groups. Furthermore, the use of the approaches of multiple round critical reflective journaling, critical circle discussion, and photo-elicitation/reflection fostered credibility and dependability, while the provision of rich, vivid, and detailed reflective narratives promoted transferability in the study (Bochner & Ellis, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck; Reviere, 2001).

Table 1 *Code to Finding Progression*

Critical Reflection	Research Question Answered	Data Resources	Analysis	Codes	Themes	Findings
Behind the Gate: (Intro)	Outline Journey	Researcher's artistic expression	Outlining the discussion of findings			
That House	RQ1	Autoethnographic story Photo Elicitation/Reflection Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression	-Stigmas -Mainstream Media -Negative Images -Fear -Crack House -Crack- Cocaine/drugs -Black Youth -Black Families -Black community -Society -Socio Economic Conditions-Normalized Dysfunction -Addiction -Innocence of Black Children -Escape	Recognizing Resilience/Determination Navigating Complex Family Contexts Extended Eyes: Protecting Black youth Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning Sense of Place and Belonging (External Forces and People)	Black Resilience

Latchkey Life #2	RQ1	Autoethnographic Story Photo Elicitation/Reflection Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression	-School -Lack of Youth Programming -Socio Economic effect on parental decisions for Black youth -Political Neglect -Injustices -Divestment in Black community -Natural genius -Innovative Black youth	Recognizing Resilience/Determination Extended Eyes: Protecting Black youth Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning Sense of Place and Belonging (External Forces and People)	Black Resilience
Desert Epiphany	RQ2	Autoethnographic Story Photo Elicitation/Reflection Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression	-Awareness -Future Vision -Purpose -Motivation -Memory -Internal Awakening -Appreciation of Village	Catalytic Consciousness and Development Extended Eyes: Protecting Black youth Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning	Epiphany
Sparkling My African Centered World View	RQ2	Autoethnographic Story Photo Elicitation/Reflection	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations	-Awareness -Internal Awakening -Historical Cultural Understanding -Purpose -Understanding -Insight -Pan Africanism	Catalytic Consciousness and Development Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning Sense of Place and Belonging	Epiphany

		Guided by CCD	and Artistic Expression	-Diaspora -Cultural Identity		
Dreams Deferred: Back Against the Wall	RQ3	Autoethnographic Story Photo Elicitation/Reflection Critical Discussion Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression Critical Discussion with Mama	-Systemic Control of Black youth development -Miseducation -Lack of Knowledge -Lack of Guidance -Socio Economic Conditions -Adolescence Transition -Youth Relationships -Peer Influence	Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning Navigating Family Contexts	Understanding Socio-Economic and Political Factors
Critical Discussion with Mama	RQ3	Critical Discussion Photo Elicitation/Reflection Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression	Lack of Knowledge -Lack of Guidance -Socio Economic Conditions -Adolescence Transition -Generational fears -Determination	Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning Navigating Family Contexts	Understanding Socio-Economic and Political Factors
Critical Reflection	Research Question Answered	Data Resources	Analysis	Codes	Themes	Findings

Behind the Gate: (Intro)	Outline Journey	Researcher's artistic expression	Outlining the discussion of findings			
That House	RQ1	Autoethnographic story Photo Elicitation/Reflection Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression	-Stigmas -Mainstream Media -Negative Images -Fear -Crack House -Crack- Cocaine/drugs -Black Youth -Black Families -Black community -Society -Socio Economic Conditions-Normalized Dysfunction -Addiction -Innocence of Black Children -Escape	Recognizing Resilience/Determination Navigating Complex Family Contexts Extended Eyes: Protecting Black youth Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning Sense of Place and Belonging (External Forces and People)	Black Resilience
Latchkey Life #2	RQ1	Autoethnographic Story Photo Elicitation/Reflection Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression	-School -Lack of Youth Programming -Socio Economic effect on parental decisions for Black youth -Political Neglect -Injustices	Recognizing Resilience/Determination Extended Eyes: Protecting Black youth Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning	Black Resilience

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Divestment in Black community -Natural genius -Innovative Black youth 	<p>Sense of Place and Belonging (External Forces and People)</p>	
Desert Epiphany	RQ2	<p>Autoethnographic Story</p> <p>Photo Elicitation/Reflection</p> <p>Guided by CCD</p>	<p>Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Awareness -Future Vision -Purpose -Motivation -Memory -Internal Awakening -Appreciation of Village 	<p>Catalytic Consciousness and Development</p> <p>Extended Eyes: Protecting Black youth</p> <p>Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning</p>	Epiphany
Sparkling My African Centered World View	RQ2	<p>Autoethnographic Story</p> <p>Photo Elicitation/Reflection</p> <p>Guided by CCD</p>	<p>Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Awareness -Internal Awakening -Historical Cultural Understanding -Purpose -Understanding -Insight -Pan Africanism -Diaspora -Cultural Identity 	<p>Catalytic Consciousness and Development</p> <p>Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning</p> <p>Sense of Place and Belonging</p>	Epiphany

Dreams Deferred: Back Against the Wall	RQ3	Autoethnographic Story Photo Elicitation/Reflection Critical Discussion Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression Critical Discussion with Mama	-Systemic Control of Black youth development -Miseducation -Lack of Knowledge -Lack of Guidance -Socio Economic Conditions -Adolescence Transition -Youth Relationships -Peer Influence	Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning Navigating Family Contexts	Understanding Socio-Economic and Political Factors
Critical Discussion with Mama	RQ3	Critical Discussion Photo Elicitation/Reflection Guided by CCD	Round 2 Critical Journaling: Bolstered Meaning of Photo Elicitations and Artistic Expression	Lack of Knowledge -Lack of Guidance -Socio Economic Conditions -Adolescence Transition -Generational fears -Determination	Effect of Systemic Inequities on Youth Development and Future Envisioning Navigating Family Contexts	Understanding Socio-Economic and Political Factors

Summary

This autoethnographic study's narrative was not intended as an irresponsible artistic expression but served as a counternarrative to conventional research methods that often objectify and minimize the voices of people who have experienced historical and current oppression. To accomplish the purpose of this autoethnographic study of exploring the influences and lived experiences that have informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming, I conducted an arts-based approach to this autoethnography study that provided insight into the possibilities of creating Black spaces where Black youth can thrive as people, students, and future community leaders. Further, this study is focused on answering the research questions (1) How did external forces and people inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming? (2) How did my inner drive and consciousness inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming? (3) How does a critique of power, privileges, and oppressions of my experiences inform my approach to Black youth empowerment programming?

The data produced from this autoethnographic study is pertinent because the recollection of my experiences as a Black youth and young adult provided a reflective mirror in the context of Black youth development work to envision a thriving future for Black youth and Black community settings as a counternarrative to the deficit-based notions often associated with Black youth. Thus, there was an intentional selection in the narratives shared in this study through a nuanced worldview as a member of the community being explored that not only encompasses the lived experiences of a Black youth empowerment program facilitator but also as a youth, student, and father leading to my involvement in this field of practice. This arts-based autoethnographic study allowed memories to be creatively textualized to bolster understanding through exposure to

distinct accounts of lived experiences that may contribute to improved practices relating to Black youth empowerment.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this art-based autoethnographic study was to explore the influences and experiences that informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming. The research questions for this study were: (1) How did external forces and people inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming (RQ1)? (2) How did my inner drive and consciousness inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming (RQ2)? (3) How does a critique of power, privileges, and oppressions of my experiences inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming (RQ3)? I provided insight into the possibilities of creating Black spaces where Black youth can thrive as people, students, and future community leaders. The findings that emerged in this study that address the research questions are (1) Black resilience, (2) epiphany, and (3) understanding socio-economic and political factors.

In this chapter, I discussed the findings that emerged from addressing the research questions posed in this study. To illustrate how these findings surfaced from addressing the research questions, I provided descriptive narratives, artistic short stories and poetic expressions, photo elicitations and reflections, and quotes from a critical discussion with a participant who experienced and observed my experiences as a Black youth growing up in a primarily Black community. I discussed how addressing each research question informed my Black youth empowerment programming approach. Lastly, I provided a conclusion for this chapter and a preview of the concluding chapter of this study.

Behind the Gate

“Mama!” I yelled in a panicked reaction to the haunting presence of silence that awoke me from a midday nap. The pressure of my pillow had matted my curly locks to the side of my head, while the accumulation of crust in the corner of my cornea was thicker than the combination of molasses and cow’s milk left outside on a cold winter morning. But this was a hot afternoon, and I was feeling the heat! I’m talking about the kind of heat that provokes the perspiration on the forehead of a five-year-old at a carnival when they turn around and realize that they don’t recognize any of the people around them. I recognized my surroundings, but the people usually around me could not be found, and I began drowning in fear.

“Daddy!” I yelled in a higher tone because if Mama was gone, I thought maybe Daddy would respond to his first-born son and assure me that I was not alone.

But I was wrong. My greatest fear was coming to life as I searched all 1,235 square feet of our home. To no avail, I was convinced I was in the “hell” that Granddaddy preached about on Sunday mornings. Had I been sentenced to eternal damnation at this early age, in an early stage of a life not yet explored? Tears became the Niagara Falls of my face, my soul soaked in sorrow, and still, my cries were ignored. I was an only child then, before the cell phone and the selfie stick, so if I needed evidence of my predicament, I was the only one there to press record.

And Mama used to say, “Bless the Lord,” but I heard a song say, “God Bless the child that’s got his own,” so I had this epiphany as the child that was on his own at that moment, that I needed to test God’s blessings and try to get out this “hell” by getting the “hell” out of this house. So, with a sense of determination, I snatched my little leather strap sandals with the toes

out, reached up, unlocked them, and went out the front door. But there was one more barrier between me and the freedom I'd connected to finding the family that a five-year-old felt familiar with. But to my ignorance, I put my sandals on the wrong feet, yet it was the right time for me to escape. I reached up to turn the final knob, only to realize that I was locked... behind the gate.

Feeling my fear intensify, I reached out. I gripped the bars that held me restricted like I'd been convicted of a crime, doing time in solitary separated from the sunlight between the first and the 23rd hour, only able to sit, shave and shower; my body began to cower under the possibility that this captivity would become my permanent reality. And this reality was a realization in the mind of a young Black boy who still believed that Santa Claus was real. And for real, the trauma in this experience was stealing my innocence, still so young and incompetent in my emotional intelligence, not knowing how to feel. Just knowing I was ill, feeling sick to my stomach, in a sunken place, sinking to the bottom of this cell separating me from a future which my soul may never have the chance to dwell...took a deep breath, closed my swollen eyes, and creatively reflected on my life stories that I may never have the opportunity to tell...

Then suddenly, I was shaken from my meditation by a familiar sound clanking that shook the gate that I'd succumb to. It was Mama's keys chaotically clamoring to counter the lock, as she yelled for me to come to...her... voice provided a sudden solace as the gate door swung open and finally, I ran into her arms of rescue.

Through this autoethnographic study, I realized that those moments I endured "behind the gate" were more expansive than just the traumatic experience of a Black child feeling abandoned. I realized that I was a mere representation of many Black youths, both past and present, who are often hindered in their development and future envisioning by systemic inequities that have historically impacted and persist in affecting Black community settings.

Furthermore, I developed an understanding that my epiphany and efforts to escape the gate on a mission to restore my sense of belonging should not be overlooked, even with my sandals on the wrong feet. It symbolized the resilience that must be recognized in Black youth who often desire and pursue the essence of family and freedom in some form or fashion, regardless of the mistakes they make or the negative stereotypes they are often characterized by.

I realized that this situation was deeper than Mama returning home to rescue me from my despair. The gate did not necessarily represent a hostile environment, but I discovered it could also mean love and protection. It was revealed that Mama left me home alone to go and address an issue, which eventually protected me from having to navigate a complex family relationship in my childhood that often many Black youth are forced to.

Consequently, my Warrior Daddy returned home to reinforce that protection in our home behind the gate, even though he felt he didn't have the same love in his childhood. I realized that there were many times in my childhood and adolescence that I was forced to face the gate without the presence of Mama or Daddy, as they engaged society to sustain our economic survival. However, they provided me with the latchkey to counter the lock, as the extended eyes of others in the community helped to assure that I made it to the secure side of the gate. Finally, I realized that the latchkey that countered the lock of the gate symbolized the catalytic consciousness and development that had to be unlocked in me so that I could artistically and audaciously express the uncovered counterstories that delineate my journey beyond the gate to pipeline to power building (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Beyond the Gate. My younger brother at age 3 (my first Black youth development participant) and I at age 14, symbolically looking beyond the gate into our futures. Photo was taken by: Mama

The introductory artistic poetic expression, entitled “Behind the Gate,” is provided as an introductory point of view for the following findings discussion section. The above narrative symbolizes my emancipatory journey as a Black youth growing up in a Black community that was negatively shaped by external forces such as socio-cultural, systemic, and institutional injustices (i.e., racism). Furthermore, the narrative captures my liberating evolution beyond the gate fueled by an unlocking of my inner drive and consciousness that sparked not only my ability to recognize forms of Black resilience exhibited by people in my childhood but also sparked an epiphany to engage in Black youth empowerment to impact future generations of Black youth. In essence, this expression captures my pursuit to counter adverse outcomes for Black youth who often feel like they are trapped “behind the gate” by contributing to building a “pipeline to power” to aid their emancipatory journey to their futures, purpose, and opportunity for impact.

Finding One: Black Resilience

The first finding in this study is Black resilience which answers the first research question. Black resilience characterizes the exertion of ability and effort by Black people to overcome perceived adversity under distinct circumstances linked to perpetuated efforts of anti-Blackness, such as the external forces discussed below (Clay, 2019). The external forces that informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming were (a) mainstream socio-cultural contexts and (b) systemic and institutional contexts within this study that informed my approach to Black youth empowerment programming. In the following section, I discussed how through conducting this autoethnographic study I realized that both the recognition and bolstering of Black resilience in Black youth and families, as the people informing my work, amidst the influence of mainstream socio-cultural and systemic institutional contexts informed my approach to Black youth empowerment.

Mainstream Socio-cultural Contexts

Through conducting this autoethnographic study, I realized that the notion of negative stereotypes, narratives, and imagery of the Black community through mainstream media and political rhetoric affected how Black youth and families were viewed and treated. Not only did people with privilege outside of my community buy into negative stereotypes, but my community and I had internalized such rhetoric that it affected how we related to our community and humanity. This was particularly revealed in my exploration of my childhood as Black youth through the 1980s and 90's, which for many urban Black communities in the United States, such as Stop Six/Eastwood, the negative context of the illegal narcotic drug crack-cocaine distinctly much of the mainstream media narrative on Black communities.

The impacts and stigma of “crack cocaine” in my community during the 1980s were so devastating and highly publicized that the background and backstory of the people engaged in it were deemed irrelevant. I recall as a Black youth watching and hearing local news and mainstream media outlets consistently reinforcing negative labeling of Black youth, adults, and homes within the Black community with terms such as crack babies, crack or dope dealers, crackheads, and crack houses. Consequently, this mainstream perception permeated through my community, often causing many of us to solely view them with the same negative gaze as the mainstream public. This understanding was substantiated in my reflection on Tandy, a Black youth, whose family lived in a house remarkably close to my childhood house. Her house was widely perceived on my street as a “crack house,” in which “crackheads” and “crack babies” lived. Furthermore, we would often refer to Tandy’s house as “that house,” which is branded as the title of the following short story artistic expression purposed to depict how the external force, mainstream socio-cultural contexts, influenced my experience as a Black youth in a Black community setting. The short story's artistic expression is followed by a photo-elicitation of a perceived “crack house” or “that” house from my childhood community, along with a discussion of how the notion of Black resilience manifested in Black youth and families amidst the external force of mainstream socio-cultural contexts.

That House

“Come on in and grab you some candy, baby.” An elderly Black woman urged me to step inside the door as she sat in what seemed to be a sofa chair from a dark corner of the room, slightly in my view.

It was Halloween night, and I had taken it upon myself to engage in the widely known trick-or-treating tradition that many youths I knew did on this day each year. For some reason,

this particular year, no one, including my parents, was chaperoning me on my mission of amassing what many kids deem as valuable, candy. I was on a solo mission because none of my friends were available, and I wanted to at least get as much candy as I could from the neighbors on my street. However, every house on my street did not provide the same pleasant trick or treating experience as others did. I stood in the doorway of a place that made me feel as though I had been injected into a real-life scary movie with a haunted house, eerily dark, spooky with slow-moving creatures that resembled zombies.

I stood petrified and frozen on the front porch step of this house, which I saw every day because it was located just across the street and adjacent to my front porch. However, on our street, this house and the people who lived in it had an unspoken negative reputation and were considered off-limits. Although I was an 80's baby, I did not fully understand the political, economic, and social implications of the drug, crack cocaine, which had flooded many primarily Black communities in America in this decade, including my neighborhood. As a Black child growing up in this era, I only perceived it as a normalized component of life in the "hood" mixed in with a diversity of both positive and negative elements from friendly neighbors to used needles on the street, from cookouts to "crack houses" where no one other than "crackheads" and "crack dealers" would dare to go.

Until this Halloween night, when something convinced me to step into the forbidden location of "that" house, the known "crack house" on our street. Was it the possibility of scoring more candy that was so strong and compelling that I ignored the verbal warnings that characterized this house and the people in it? Was candy so enticing to children that once they tasted it, they were willing to risk it all, just like a person addicted to crack cocaine? Was the "sugar" of candy a gateway drug for children to engage in addictive drugs?

“Hey, do you want some candy or a cupcake?” A sweet and youthful voice asked as I remained in a frozen state of fear on the front porch.

In my shock, I had not realized that there was a caramel-skinned Black girl, around my age, with long, wavy, jet-black hair standing at the door. An easing feeling came over me at that moment, and I could move my body again. It was her, Tandy, standing at the door of the house that other kids on the street were forbidden, inviting me to come in. She lived here, slept here, ate here, and whatever other Black youth did in their homes, she did it in “that” house. However, on this night, she was a comforting light to guide me into the abyss of the unknown.

“It’s okay; we’re having a party.” She uttered, still sensing my hesitancy to step inside.

Still unable to speak, I felt a calming trust in Tandy and took a trusting step into “that house.” Suddenly, two adult-sized figures emerged from a dark hallway to my left. Extreme fear once again took over my body, but I did not freeze; I pivoted and turned around 180 degrees and ran like Bambi with a pack of hyenas on his tail! I darted across the street and did not look back until I closed the wrought iron gate on my porch behind me. I had escaped “that house,” but Tandy was still there (see figure 3).

For many years after this experience, I was traumatized and intentionally stayed away from that house, even though it was right across the street. This house, the people who lived in it, and others like it were either seen as the target of jokes among the youth or the example of what we were warned not to become by our parents. Consequently, I would avoid speaking to anyone I saw who lived in that house or even making eye contact. This included Tandy.



Figure 3. That House. This house is depicted as a house from my childhood community affected by the Crack Cocaine Era in the 1980s.

Manifestation of Black Resilience in Black Youth and Families

This picture depicts a house labeled as a “crack house” throughout my childhood by mainstream media, which socialized the public to view the people inside as undesirable beings engaged in undesirable activities. However, I obtained insight through this autoethnography study that despite experiencing dehumanization from the public and often ostracization within our neighborhood, the notion of Black resilience was displayed by: (a) Black adults, such as elders, and (b) Black youth living in these circumstances.

In my community, elders were considered Black adults who were either parents or grandparents who provided a form of guidance, leadership, or wisdom to generations younger. I experienced Black elders, such as the grandmother of Tandy, making efforts for the Black youth within the home still had a semblance of a childhood, such as a party for Tandy that I ran away from. Furthermore, the dark figures at the party that emerged from the darkness to scare me away were Tandy’s uncles, who had become addicted to crack cocaine but still protected the

household that her grandmother persisted in holding together. The Black adults of this household found the resolve to adapt to circumstances linked to being viewed as less than human inside and outside of our community to sustain a family environment that could still protect the opportunity for Black youth, like Tandy, to grow up.

Then there was Tandy, a Black youth, whom I observed living in the Black community's perceived "black-eye" in the '80s and '90s. Throughout my childhood, I experienced the degradation that crack-cocaine addiction had on people both mentally and physically, even horrid episodes of people considered "high" exhibiting erratic behaviors such as talking to imaginary people, making sudden movements, and rapid scratching. Consequently, I often felt a sense of concern for Tandy, whom I perceived as "normal," living among addicts who displayed the behaviors I feared. Yet, while living amongst what I and many others perceived as dysfunction as I stood on the other side of the street, I remember seeing Tandy walk out of her front door each day and board the school bus with her head held high. Conducting this study helped me view Tandy's ability to navigate negative perceptions and maintain childhood behaviors, such as having parties, playing outside, and regularly attending school to eventually walk across the stage on her graduation day as Black resilience.

Systemic and Institutional Contexts

The next external force that materialized in this study to address RQ1 was systemic and institutional contexts. While mainstream media socialized the American public with negative stereotypes regarding Black communities amid the enduring onslaught of crack cocaine, these sentiments often transferred to institutional policies and practices that oppressed Black youth and families. Through conducting this study, the notion of institutional inequities surfaced in my exploration of my matriculation through the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD). I

recalled a pivotal experience in my childhood as a student at A.M. Pate Elementary school. In the aftermath of institutional racism perpetuated by FWISD, I was forced to become a latchkey kid with no structured opportunities for youth development services because FWISD did not allocate funds to schools within my community to address this need. This inequity would create idle time in the minds of Black youth who were not willing to sit idly by and allow our time to be wasted.

The following short story illustrates the consequences of systemic inequities affecting Black youth in Stop Six/Eastwood, including myself.

Latchkey Life Part 2: The Battle Grounds

“BRRRRNNNGG!” The last bell of the school day rang as we stood in a single file line facing our classroom door in anticipation of exiting the school premises.

“Ok, students, I will see ya’ll tomorrow!” Mrs. Granderson expressed, releasing us for the day.

Suddenly, students began speedily moving toward the school’s front entrance as though they had just learned that ice cream was being given away outside on a “first come, first serve” basis. As I hurried through the front doors to investigate, I saw students sprinting towards a growing crowd of children across the street. They began assembling a circular formation in a large grassy field in front of the Weber Gardens apartment complex, located directly across from A.M. Pate elementary school. The sounds of yelling and chatter from the youth crowd began to increase in volume. At this point, I knew exactly what the raucous was all about.

“Say, Dee, who finna’ fight?” I asked as I squeezed my way into the crowd.

“Man, Quan and Lonnie got into after Quan cheated him in pencil break!” Dee responded excitedly as though he was sitting at the ringside of a world championship boxing match.

“What? He cheated; how?!” I inquired.

“Well, instead of breaking the pencil with his pencil, he straight-up Karate Chopped...” Before Dee could finish telling the background story, the crowd of students erupted in yelling!

“Ooh, get ‘em, Quan!” Big Trissa yelled at her younger cousin, who had thrown the first strike of the fight.

In the blink of an eye, the two 4th graders were entrenched in a heated scuffle which included a mixture of shoves, slams, kicks, missed punches with a festive crowd, which resulted in teary eyes, a torn t-shirt, a pair of grass-stained Wrangler jeans and a bloody lip.

“Hey, hey, ya’ll cut that mess out and go home!” Henry Townsend’s mother yelled as she pulled up in her canary yellow Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme with the hundred spokes rims on white wall tires.

The rambunctious “Watoto” crowd dispersed when they heard Ms. Townsend’s voice because everyone knew that she did not play. She was a retired police officer who was respected in the community and known for preventing many youths from going to jail in the ’70s and 80’s, she became a personal trainer and life coach to help Black women improve their mental and physical health. Many of the students at A.M. Pate had witnessed Ms. Townsend leap out of her car with a double knotted switch and simultaneously “whoop” at least ten students who were involved in a group fight just before Christmas break, including her son and daughter, who were standing by and watching.

On top of that, she rounded them all up inside the school, had the school secretary call all their parents, and made them sit next to each other in harmony until their parents arrived. And guess what? When the parents of the students involved in the fight arrived, she told them why

she had “whooped” their children with a switch. They simply said, “thank you for looking out, Sista,” made their child apologize to her and the others, and took them home.

“There go’ Henry Mama; I’m out!” I expressed as I darted towards the direction of my house with my backpack bouncing wildly on my back.

“These kids need something constructive to do after school, Mr. Holcombe!” I heard Mrs. Townsend yelling at our school principal, who had crossed the street from the school into Weber Garden apartments at that point.

“They need programs just like those schools on the other side of the town!” She continued as she pointed her finger toward the principal in frustration.

“I’m trying, Regina, but our funding is limited over here and...” I heard Mr. Holcombe reply before walking out of hearing distance.

Manifestation of Black Resilience

As I grew up, I would learn to understand that when someone from my neighborhood used the terms “over here” vs. “on the other side of town,” they were referring to “over here” in the Black community with the primarily Black families and schools. On the other hand, “the other side of town” referred to predominantly white neighborhoods, with white middle- and upper-class families and schools. Henry’s Mama and Mrs. Townsend were upset about, along with many other Black parents and community stakeholders in Fort Worth’s Black communities, Stop 6/Eastwood, the inequitable allocation of funding into schools that served primarily white families versus the funding that served mostly Black families. Furthermore, more affluent families could afford to send their children to fee-paid youth enrichment programs, such as music lessons, sports performance camps, gymnastics, etc... Despite these systemic inequities

negating institutional support for youth development opportunities for Black youth, Black resilience was by (a) Black adults and (b) Black youth.

Black parents, such as Mrs. Townsend, and Black elders, such as Mrs. Eileen, who lived across the street from me and served as a crossing guard for students walking home from school, displayed Black resilience in their determination to act as “extended eyes” to make efforts assure that Black youth made it home safely. In contrast, other Black parents, such as mine, worked to sustain economic survival for Black families. I realized that many Black adults in my community exerted Black resilience as determination to maintain the element of community or “village” that upholds the responsibility of protecting its youth. I recall many who would stand on their front porch, look through windows and even drive down streets. In contrast, many Black youths, such as myself, walked home after school.

Black youth lacking structured activities, particularly between the hours of 3 P.M. to 6 P.M., sizzled with energy that needed to be applied, and resiliently, we formulated means to do so. While some Black youth engaged in activities perceived as negative such as fighting, we also led innovative and competitive activities such as “throw-up” tackle football, wrestling, group jump roping, marbles, pencil-break, foot racing, flipping (gymnastics), 3-on-3 basketball, sketching, slap boxing, sidewalk chalk art, among many others. I gained an understanding that because our sense of place and belonging was not being satiated by development opportunities and safe spaces that we could claim ownership of, we were compelled to create our own expressive spaces and develop our intrinsic abilities the best way we understood how (see figure 4).

While we were innovating these various ways to display our interests, I remember the competitive intensity that often surfaced while engaging in these activities, becoming chastised

by teachers and administrators. I grew up with Black youth who were being labeled with learning, mental and emotional disorders while being tagged as "at risk." Through conducting this study, I learned that many of the same Black youth that I grew up with who endured the combination of divestment in our community and negative labeling within the school system began engaging in higher-risk behaviors such as selling drugs, joining gangs, and other negative outcomes and their sense of place, and belonging heightened through our adolescent years in the 1990s.



Figure 4. The Battle Grounds. This is a location where Black youth displayed Black Resilience through creating spaces to exert creative energy amidst not having structured youth development programming.

Black Resilience and My Approach to Black Youth Empowerment

The presence of Black resilience that I realized was prevalent in my community as a Black youth through this study informs my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming by showing the importance of (a) intentionally recognizing and bolstering the ability of Black youth to adapt to and overcome adversity as a foundational aspect of cultivating

their development, and; (b) intentionally recognizing Black adults who display the ability to adapt to and overcome adversity, such as parents and other stakeholders, to identify them as assets to help foster and protect the opportunity for Black youth to thrive; (c) identify accessible, safe spaces and opportunities for Black youth to express and cultivate interests and abilities while fulfilling a sense of ownership and acceptance. While many aspects of society affecting Black youth have changed, such as technology and the presence of social media, the latency of mainstream socio-cultural and systemic and institutional contexts persist in the present day. Thus, centering Black resilience in my work to equip Black youth and families to navigate and overcome these sustaining external forces is vital to collaborative efforts purposed to ignite Black youth to pursue actualization and effect transformational change in their families and communities.

Finding Two: Epiphany

The second finding in this study is an epiphany, which answers the second research question in this study. The notion of epiphany that materialized in this study is characterized by the sudden revelation of meaning that provided clarity for purposeful action. In the following section, I discuss how the notion of epiphany derived in my autoethnographic study illustrates how the elements of (a) inner drive and (b) consciousness informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming.

Inner Drive

After graduating from the historic Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in the heart of the Stop Six community, I embraced the fact that it was time for me to face the decision that I had made from desperation regarding my future beyond high school just a few months prior, serving in the United States Marine Corps. While I'd been training physically and mentally to endure the

rigorous training and challenges that the Marine Corps was known for, I was anxious to experience it firsthand.

After landing in San Diego, California, and boarding a white bus, a group of other anxious young males of various races and backgrounds and I arrived in front of a set of yellow-painted footsteps, where an assortment of men with stern faces wearing green attire and large green brimmed hats. As soon as the bus door opened, one of the men leaped onto the bus and began yelling, “Get up, get off this bus and get your feet on a set of yellow footprints!”

Immediately, without much thinking, we simultaneously jolted from our bus seats and rapidly filed off the bus onto the yellow footprints as the other uniformed men, referred to as Drill Instructors, began yelling in our faces with even more intensity than the first one. It was safe to say that I had arrived at Marine Corps Bootcamp!

After several days of limited sleep, standing in long lines for processing procedures and paperwork, and enduring what is affectionately known in the Marine Corps as “hurry up and wait,” we began a tortuous daily schedule that included alternating sessions with physical training, classroom learning, combat martial arts, and cleaning, with extremely brief meal periods that often ended with having to throw away full trays of food and spitting out partially chewed morsels into the trash can. Though these first days of this brutal schedule were challenging and stressful, it was during an intense physical training session in a sandpit that I experienced my first epiphany.

I found myself in extreme pain in the middle of a push-up exercise that we were being commanded to hold in the upright position with our arms fully extended. While I was no stranger to pushups and had completed hundreds over the first few days of Bootcamp, the combination of limited sleep, rushed eating periods, an unrelenting schedule, and high-strung drill instructors'

constant pressure was taking its toll on me both mentally and physically. In an agonizing moment, just when I felt my arms and my mind giving up, which if I had fallen to the ground, all the Marine Corps recruits around me would have been forced to start the exercise over, I recalled a memory from my childhood. I remembered when my Warrior Daddy challenged me to pull car and truck tires in preparation for pee-wee football, and I felt I had no more strength or energy remaining in my body to pull the tire past the finishing mark. However, he would implore me not to give up on myself and the people counting on me. Consequently, because I did not want to disappoint myself, my Daddy, nor anyone else, I somehow found the strength mentally and physically to finish the exercise, I somehow found the strength mentally and physically to finish the exercise because I did not want to disappoint myself, my Daddy, or anyone else.

The occurrence of this epiphany of this childhood memory amid a moment of perceived helplessness propelled me to employ a strategy of detaching my mind from my body to envision myself beyond the pain. Subsequently, I successfully completed the physical training session and eventually completed and graduated from Marine Corps boot camp and Marine Combat Training using this strategy.

Through conducting this autoethnographic study I comprehended that this epiphany I experienced in this high pressure and painful moment that ignited my inner drive that contributed greatly to my strengthened ability to navigate and overcome the challenges that characterized this time in my life. While this notion of inner drive sustained for a few months after graduating Marine Corps boot camp, it began to wane rapidly as I came to understand that being assigned to a deploying unit in the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) meant that I would be engaged in periodic desert trainings in the sweltering California desert called Combined Arms Exercises (CAX) and

boarding a Naval Vessel to train in other parts of the world for six months at a time on expeditions that started in the Pacific ocean called West Pacs.

Furthermore, I had made another detrimental decision by choosing a military occupation based on its potential for high income. Though I had not signed up to become a combat infantry soldier as was attempted by my recruiter, the job of an avionics technician on the oldest helicopter in the Marine Corps proved to be an unfulfilling undertaking. Consequently, I strongly disliked my job and dreaded each 10-to-12-hour day I had to step into an aircraft hangar and onto a CH-46 helicopter, which had been flying combat missions since the Vietnam War.

Over the next few years of my enlistment in the Marines, I grudgingly performed my job duties, which included enduring the grit, grease, and grind of fixing helicopters along with traveling to various countries around the world, such as Thailand, Australia, Singapore, and the Seychelle Islands. Although these were memorable experiences for a Black youth from Stop Six, in which I built memorable relationships, the daily toil of engaging in unfulfilling work began to take its toll on me mentally, emotionally, and even physically as I began to experience back and foot issues. By the end of my five-year enlistment in the Marine Corps, the inner drive that was sparked within me during boot camp through an epiphany of my childhood experience with my Warrior Daddy had fizzled out, and I decided that I would transition out of the military and move back home as a civilian. By conducting this study, I gained clarity that my inner drive faded because it was not connected to a greater purpose that I intrinsically felt compelled to apply my energy to pursue. Unfortunately, being the United States Marine did not provide that sense of purpose for me as it may have for others. Thus, I deemed it necessary to move on.

As a result of choosing an undesirable military occupation, I felt the same uncertainty that contributed to me deciding to join the Marines. While attending college would likely be my

first step after returning home, not having a clear understanding of future aspirations to align a college education increased my anxiety about leaving the Marine Corps. Furthermore, I had no job prospects, and I was not excited about the possibility of having to move back in with my parents up returning to Fort Worth.

However, there was a sudden turn of events that would change my life forever. In January of 2003, while I was in my transition phase to exit the Marines in the next few months, my commanding officer called an emergency formation. While standing in a formation of hundreds of unsuspecting young men and women, I remember hearing is something like, “Get all your business in order because we are leaving for Iraq in two weeks!” A sense of shock vibrated through my body as I attempted to process what I had just been thrust into. Subsequently, two weeks later, after a visit from my parents and getting married on a whim, I was on a ship headed to war in the Middle East instead of heading back home to Fort Worth, Texas.

I recall it just being a few days after our ship arrived on the southern coast of Kuwait when we received the news that President Bush had ordered all the inspectors, who were assigned to search for “weapons of mass destruction,” to leave Iraq immediately because the United States would be invading. My unit would be heading into a war in the Iraqi desert called “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” I remember watching CNN on the ship as the first wave of both Marine Corps and Army troops flooded the Iraqi desert. A growing list of names of young people, including Black youth, was plastered on the television screen as casualties of war who would never experience their futures.

I remember being informed that I would be heading into the Iraqi desert in the next wave of troop insertion into the combat zone. After making a final call home to my parents, I began grappling with the possibility of never returning home. Interestingly, as we arrived in the Iraqi

desert, I was not overwhelmed with a sense of fear. However, the context of being in a combat zone triggered a constant sense of uncertainty about what could happen, which made each day unsettling. Then amid enduring another 120-degree weather day and a harsh sandstorm, which I found myself asking, “how did I get myself into this,” suddenly, another epiphany occurred in my mind that would once again spark my inner drive, yet this time it would lastingly shift my perspective of my purpose and future.

In this following artistic short story expression entitled “Desert Epiphany,” I captured my psychological experience with the epiphany I underwent in the Iraqi desert in my final phase of being in the United States Marine Corps. I provided an elicited photo reflection (see figure 5).

Desert Epiphany

“If I make it back home, I will do something to help the youth coming behind me make decisions about their lives based on a vision and not because their backs are against the wall!” As I braced myself to withstand another vicious sandstorm on an airfield in the middle of the Iraqi desert, a thought sparked in my mind.

In this moment of uncertainty, a myriad of thoughts drenched my mind triggering this epiphany that I hoped would have the opportunity to come to fruition. I remembered my childhood growing up in a Black neighborhood, where people of many ages had good hearts and good intentions.

Like mine, I thought about the hardworking mothers and fathers who were hardly ever mentioned as staples of the Black community in mainstream media. I thought about how many of the families in my community often acted as an extended family network to assure that each other’s children and homes were safe. When my Daddy had to take a second job, while my mother was also working in the evening, I often stayed with neighbors or cousins that made sure

I was safe, fed, and completed my homework under their extended eyes. I remembered when one of my friend's mothers, who lived a few houses away, went missing and was found murdered; the community looked out for the family and assisted in raising him in his mother's absence.

I remembered when Mr. Lynford, a hardworking father, risked his safety by going into the street to break up a fight between a group of young Black males and accidentally slipped and fell to the ground with one of the young men in his arms, injuring his hand, because under his extended eyes as the village he wanted to protect the life of Black youth being lost.

I remembered the Black youth that I grew up with or connected with at some point, from childhood friends, and classmates to teammates. I remembered how innocent we, as bright-eyed students, were coming into the early grades of elementary school, excited for the first days of school, with new school clothes, supplies, and a chance to see those we had not seen for months. Contrary to the widespread belief I remember Black boys and girls being excited to learn. On the other hand, I remember the shift in energy towards students like Marquel, Timothy, Lee, Lil' Del, and Trisha, among others, who were full of energy, liked to get up and move around during class.

Unfortunately, I remember teachers yelling at them to sit down, be quiet, and eventually remove them from class. Those same Black youth, who lived in the same community as me, began to get labeled as "bad," "disruptive," and more. Some found themselves in situations where they felt extreme desperation, and they either died or had to do time for the criminalization of the path they perceived was the way they had to provide for the people they felt purposed to protect. I thought about Hannibal lying in the street with his life and potential leaking away with the gunshot wounds in his chest.

I thought about my older sister that we never got to maximize our sibling relationship because family relationships outside of our control were never fully maximized. I also thought about the possible relationship with the sister left in darkness for the same reason. I pondered what happened to the girl that stood behind the door of “that house” and how she navigated the daily reality and stigma of the environment within the environment that she was forced to grow up in. I thought about R.J. and the group of Black youth that yearned for a brotherhood to belong to and a territory claim and protect.

I thought about my Warrior Daddy, who, despite his mistakes in life, had committed to raising me the best he knew how, even though he often expressed bitterness with how the father who adopted him at the age of 2 had chosen to raise him or not. I remember the many days and hours of him training me at Wilbarger Park in preparation for football seasons. I remember him digging a hole in the front yard next to our driveway to pour cement for a basketball goal I and my friends in the neighborhood could practice on because the city of Fort Worth had not built a recreation center within walking distance.

I thought about Mama, who loved me unconditionally but worked so hard to provide me and eventually my younger brother with everything she felt she didn't have growing up. She often missed the firsthand experience of the many trials and triumphs of my life as an athlete. I remember being in the Magnet program in middle school and having so much homework that I would still be working on it when my Mama would come home at midnight.

“Bobo, go ahead and get in the bed; I will wake you up early to finish it.” Mama would relieve me of the frustration after hours of academic torture.

I even thought about the other Black youth who had found themselves in the same shoes as I, enlisting in the United States military to find a way out of the uncertainty they felt inundated

with back home. I remembered how we would often discuss why and how we ended up in the Marine Corps, which most of us alluded to the perception of “lack of options” and not having the “economic means” to do much else. Unfortunately, many of the young Black marines whom I met on my final deployment to Iraq aboard a naval vessel did not make it out of the Iraqi desert alive (see Figure 5).

Ultimately, my epiphany superseded my recollections of my own experiences and focused my mind on generations of Black youth coming behind me. I envisioned a future for them that would equip the community around them to quell their feelings of uncertainty by helping to develop their own visions for their futures, while aiding them to build a plan for pursuing it. While I didn’t quite know at the time exactly how I would enact this vision, I was certain that it was my life’s mission.



Figure 5. Painting the Desert Black. Image of Me and other Black Members of the United States Marine Corps in the Iraqi Desert

In this gritty image it appears to be just four young men posing as patriotic members of the United States armed services with basic weapons that they have been trained to handle. However, there is much more behind the green T-shirts and desert camouflaged utility pants. I, along with the other Black young men standing beside were a microcosm of many Black youth who found themselves in harm's way, with many being severely injured or even dying in the Iraqi desert, who never envisioned that lived experience as part of their future in their childhoods. Many of us shared similar stories of being and feeling mislabeled, misguided, unguided, underdeveloped and misunderstood in the same type of school systems and divestment in our communities, which contributed to the perception of limited future options. From our dreams being deferred, to desperation to make life decisions, to endangering our lives for a country that has a history of not prioritizing our full potential development.

Conducting this autoethnographic study helped me understand that the epiphany that I experienced in the Iraqi desert was responsible for: (a) igniting my inner drive to endure the uncertainty and other challenges related to this time in my life, (b) forcing me to reflect on the people and external forces that had impacted my life to that point, and (c) clarifying my purpose of centering my energy and abilities on impacting the lives of Black youth who I perceived faced similar circumstances as I had as a Black youth. In essence, this epiphany stimulated a sense of awareness or consciousness that guided me to pursue opportunities to build my capacity to effectively develop Black youth upon returning to the United States.

Consciousness

After returning from Iraq, I successfully transitioned out of the Marine Corps and returned to Texas. While the epiphany in the desert had ignited my inner drive and sense of consciousness that clarified my purpose of impacting Black youth and desire to become

equipped to engage it did not come with a plan on how to navigate the consequences of prior decisions, I'd made. This included operating in a marriage that I had no experience in prior to being in Iraq. Neither she nor I was ready for the chaotic conditions of a marriage between two Black college students that neither one of us had constructed the capacity to sustain.

Furthermore, my veteran status provided me with a path to a college education but did not guarantee opportunities for economic stability, thus, I struggled to find and maintain employment or maybe I lacked the knowledge to navigate finding employment as a civilian, particularly after just spending five years of my life engaged in a military occupation that would be troublesome for me to attempt to labor beyond the military. Eventually, the multi-faceted instability of our marriage, along with our immaturity stunted our ability and even willingness to sustain our relationship, leading to separation and eventually divorce.

However, amid the difficulties with my first wife, we produced our first son, Julani, who would essentially gain very little experience with his mother and father co-habiting in his household. Consequently, I had positioned myself as a father in a similar situation to the one my Daddy had with my older sister, Misty. Not only did I realize that I would have to navigate a complex family relationship to nurture the relationship with my son, but he would also have to navigate a complex family relationship. However, I was determined to not allow a failed marriage to be the determinant of a damaged self-identity that I had seen in my sister's evolution into adulthood. The combination of navigating co-parenting, fatherhood, college, self-discovery, and clarifying the path for my envisioned purpose, while surviving financially, was often a difficult and stressful period in my journey. However, I ascertained insight through this study that the inner drive derived from my epiphany in the Iraqi desert help me to overcome this challenging period, while my consciousness or awareness of my purpose to impact Black youth

allowed me to conceptualize these experiences as tools and a part of my own development that was preparing me to engage in Black youth and community-based work.

After taking a host of basic courses at a local junior college, I was struggling to connect the content of the courses and how it was presented to my purpose with Black youth and communities. Through this study I realized that my developing consciousness, which was linked to my purpose, was conflicting with the content of many of the college courses I was taking. I further realized that these courses were more centered on the experiences and perspectives of White people in American society and the world. I realized that because I had not been equipped to effectively counter this by neither FWISD nor the United States Marine Corps, I became frustrated despite doing well academically. However, in the fall of 2005 I enrolled at the University of Texas at Arlington and enrolled in a course that would incite catalytic transformation to my holistic understanding of the cultural dynamics of Blackness not only in America but all over the world.

The following artistic poetic expression encapsulates the impact that taking my first course centered on the study of Black people had on my level of consciousness and the subsequent influence on my journey to leading Black youth empowerment programming. An image of an assigned textbook from this course follows the artistic expression (see figure 6).

Sparking My African Centered World View

African history was a mystery before I step into Dr. Jalloh's course,
Of course, I knew that Africa existed, but its history was non-existent in my
understanding of the globe.

And yes, back in grade school, we would spin the globe around
on its plastic axis as fast as we could.

It was like a contest, but the context of the massive landmass
called Africa never seemed to make it into the context of the class content
To be taught by the teachers or in the textbooks authorized by the state of Texas,

Unless we were talking about lions, tigers, and elephants,

And they say an elephant never forgets,

And neither do I, and the only African reference I remembered was “Simba.”

From the Lion King,

But from K through 12th grade, no teacher took the time to teach “nouns” associated with

Africa,

I’m talking about people, places, and things,

Especially the people,

I remembered us being identified as Black and African American people,

But the “African” part had been ignored and negated,

I only remembered watching starving African youth on infomercials,

So, my viewpoint of African people had been deflated.

And being referred to as African was often amusing,

But clearly, we were confused then because those

same youth, who were equally as melanated as we were, was never equated,

To the Black skin that we grew up in,

Still Fighting to fit into a nation that I fought for,

And I thought for a moment about the declaration I made to fight

For the Envisioned Futures of Black youth who walked in the same shoes,

Who would one day find themselves finally “finding” themselves somewhere

Between truth, knowledge, and vision.

I'd returned to the states and entered college as I'd promised Mama'nem

When I'd made the military decision,

Slicing through basic coursework with precision,

but it was not until that class in the Fall of 2005 at UTA that sparked the

coagulation of consciousness that became catalytic to my mission,

“Welcome to African History!”

My ancestors spoke through Dr. Jalloh, and I listened (see Figure 6).

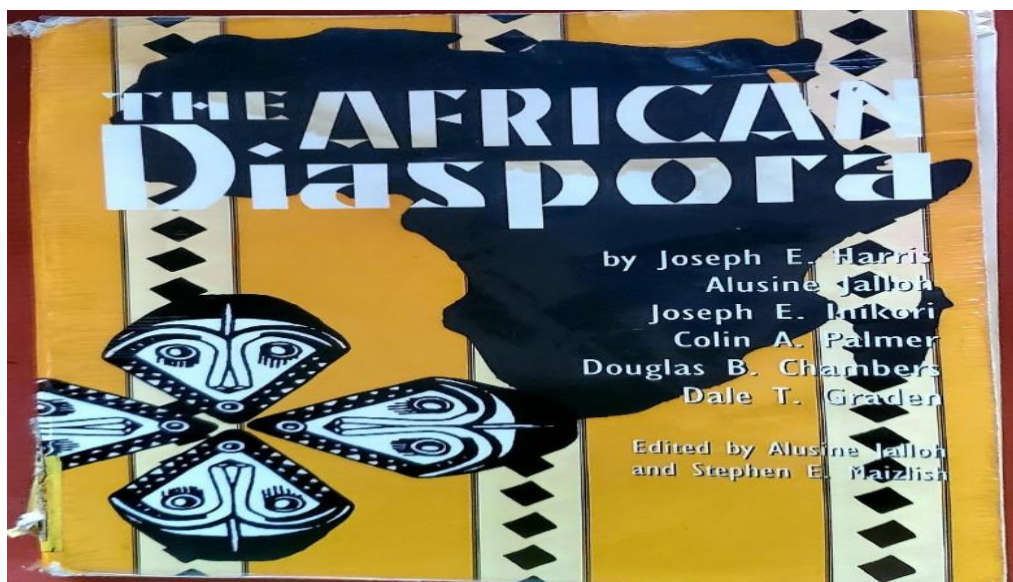


Figure 6. African Centered Consciousness. Image of book assigned in my first Black history college course ever.

The image above appears to be a book about Africa, as the silhouetted geographical outline of the continent is clearly positioned behind the title of the text, The African Diaspora. However, this book represents more than just an accumulation of paper and ink discussing aspects of world history related to the African continent and its connection to Black people in the global context. It represents an igniting entry point into a period of enlightenment and

consciousness development of my life that fueled my competency to take on the challenge of leading engagement in the distinct work of Black youth empowerment.

In this introductory course, I was introduced to the notion of Black or African centered thought, in which people of African descent prioritized viewing the world through their own cultural perspectives. Moreover, I began understanding how to examine world history, including American history through the lens of those whose stories were left untold in the textbooks and curriculum frameworks that my formal education had been guided by until I graduated high school. I remembered being introduced to a few Black historical figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and others through occasional Black history projects, because of the growing pressure of standardized testing in the 1990's, we only had time to scathed over his "dream" and her "sitting." However, this college course kindled a consciousness that caused me to begin analyzing the background stories, motivations, and influences of Black historical figures and how they linked to other people and events in the global context.

While I grew up in a Black community and attended grade schools with majority Black student populations, most of my teachers throughout my matriculation were White females. In my childhood and adolescence, I never really thought much about this fact, but as I began to learn more about Black history inside and outside of Dr. Jalloh's African history course, I intrinsically began understanding how this hindered my cultural development and understanding of myself as a Black youth in this society and world. I realized that it was deeper than their Whiteness, it was the lack of cultural competence that sustained either their inability or unwillingness to connect the content of what they were teaching to the cultural context that we as Black youth lived in and the cultural history that could have informed it. Furthermore, I realized that many of the Black teachers held a similar indictment because they had been formally trained

to teach Black youth through the same White worldview that was natural and beneficial to their White counterparts, but often detrimental to us.

Within this course, I was introduced to Kwame Nkrumah, a revolutionary from Ghana, who's worldview was Pan-African in nature, forwarding that Black people all over the world were connected in our plight and we should pursue collective unity. I learned that he was inspired by the efforts of Marcus Garvey, who also held a Pan-African ideology and engaged in arduous efforts to build socio-economic infrastructure to empower Black people in the United States and the African diaspora. Furthermore, I learned that Marcus Garvey had been an influence on the parents and family of Malcolm X, who became a foremost leader in Black history. This course incited my inclination to understand the mindset of those who came before me who were willing to commit their lives to the purpose they felt inside and risk their lives for it, such as Sojourner Truth, Shirley Chisholm, Carter G. Woodson, Queen Nanny, and those whose stories are rarely or never told at all in American classrooms, such as those from ancient African civilizations.

My development of consciousness related to centering perspectives of people of African descent was expanded, and I realized that I needed increase my understanding of the historical and current nature of societal systems that Black people continue to exist in and must navigate to bolster our collective economic, political, social, and physical viability. This understanding aided my pursuit to guide Black youth and future generations in intensifying their own sense of empowerment through challenges that history proves they can, including my own son.

My growing consciousness of the historical and current plight of Black people inspired me to intensify my engagement in Black organizations on the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) campus. I joined the Black Student Association (BSA), the student chapter of the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Association of Black Journalists and eventually the Zeta Chi chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. Furthermore, I decided to run for an executive committee seat in the NAACP and was elected as political chair, which allowed me to strengthen my capacity to collaborate with and lead other young people in matters regarding Black issues both on the UTA campus and in the local Black community. Subsequently, I began to find my voice as an influential Black student leader, which led to being asked to speak and facilitate workshops at various student led events on campus.

While the initial opportunities for public speaking and training with Black students were unnerving, I recaptured the childhood passion to perform that I displayed when I was allowed to read aloud in class in elementary school. Moreover, I reclaimed my zeal for creativity in writing and performing poetry and even singing, which I had lost under the demands associated with being a United States Marine, in which my inner drive was directed by external forces versus my intrinsic purpose. Along with my growing knowledge of my cultural identity and the complexities of the Black experience in the world, I utilized a holistic style with a combination of all my talents, experiences, and passion to deepen my approach to influencing and inspiring Black students to find their voice and purpose and use it to affect positive change in Black community settings.

Inner Drive and Consciousness and My Approach to Black Youth Empowerment

Through conducting this autoethnographic study I ascertained insight into the concepts of inner drive and consciousness that I experienced as a Black youth informed my approach to Black youth empowerment in various ways. First, I realized that engaging Black youth in activities that challenge them both mentally and physically provides an opportunity for them to spark an inner drive that boosts their self-esteem and belief in overcoming challenges.

Furthermore, consistently centering the ignition of their inner drive positions Black youth to utilize their inner drive as a means of self-determination in overcoming real world challenges that face them.

I also understood that to counter the dissipation or misguidance of an actualized notion of inner drive in Black youth, their inner drive must be guided to maximize culturally relevant impact in Black families and communities through helping to bolster their consciousness of: (a) their envisioned purpose for future impact of Black families and communities; (b) their historical and current cultural connection to the plight of Black people not only in America but across the African diaspora; and (c) the economic, political, social and physical contexts that affect Black families and communities.

Finding Three: Understanding Socio-economic and Political factors

The third finding in this study is the concept of understanding socio-economic and political factors, which answers the third research question of this study. The idea of socio-economic factors, which are externalized in this study, is delineated by lifestyle aspects that affect the societal status and financial survival of Black youth and families, such as levels of income and education. The notion of political factors is described as policy-based decisions made by elected officials that affect Black youth and families, such as deciding where funding is allocated. In the following section, I discuss how the understanding of socio-economic and political factors emerged in my autoethnographic study to illustrate how the critique of power, privileges and oppressions informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming.

Through conducting this autoethnographic study the concept of power materialized in my critical reflection of the external forces, mainstream cultural-social and systemic and institutional

contexts, which both affected not only my opportunities for development as a Black youth but also Black youth and families in my childhood community, as discussed in finding one.

However, it is important to note that finding one explores: (a) how the external forces and people I experienced as a Black youth informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment, which I provided narratives of my experiences as a Black youth unaware of the complexities of the external forces affecting the people I highlighted in my community. However, finding three emerged from an exploration of: (b) the influence of my intentional critique of the complexities of those external forces and how it informed my approach to Black youth work, which my critical approach was undergirded by a bolstered consciousness ignited in my latter years as a Black youth, as discussed in finding two.

Regarding mainstream socio-cultural contexts, the notion of power was exerted, mainly through the 1980s and 1990s, in the proliferation of negative stereotypes and dehumanizing labeling of Black youth and families on local and national mainstream media outlets. I realized that during my childhood and adolescence, the demonizing narratives and lexicon expressed on mainstream media, such as “crack babies” and “super predators,” were mirrored by the reporters and political pundits, who reported, discussed, and debated the status of Black communities, and the politicians, who made decisions on policies affecting Black communities. Moreover, I remember perceiving most, if not all, these perpetrators as being White citizens.

I gained the understanding that both the ownership entities and management of mainstream media outlets, along with primarily local, state, and federally elected politician, shared decision-making power to inundate the American public with adverse narratives to characterize Black youth and communities while negating to broadcast of the positive and progressive efforts within them. Subsequently, it became more apparent to me that this public

socialization process conditioned the environment in America to justify the onslaught of systemic and institutional forces at the local, state, and federal levels to institute and enforce policies that exacerbated the criminalization Black youth and divestment in Black community settings. Hence, my critique of FWISD failing to invest in youth development programming opportunities for campuses in my predominantly Black community of Stop Six/Eastwood and the correlation between the Black youth who were denied development opportunities and the intensification of the same Black youth being negatively labeled, criminalized and experiencing inequitable disciplinary practices, both of which I observed as a Black youth, demonstrates the importance of the exertion of power and its impact on the development of Black youth.

I further comprehended through this study that the exertion of power through mechanisms such as mainstream media and systemic and institutional policymaking that distinctly undermines Black people and communities is the manifestation of systemic or institutional injustices such as racism, ableism, and classism. Moreover, the application of systemic injustices formulates (a) oppressions and (b) privileges, which often have a generational impact.

Oppressions

In my senior year at Dunbar High School, I completed playing my final year of high school varsity football in the heart of Stop Six. I exerted maximum effort in each game because I, like many other Black youths on my team, believed that this was my only way to attend college, which many of us also believed was the only option we had for success after high school. Interestingly, my fellow high school seniors and I were considered successful in the academic context because many of the Black youth who'd been negatively labeled with learning and behavioral disabilities and inequitably punished and denied developmental investment as

students in elementary and middle school had already dropped out or were on the verge of doing so due to indirect effects such as incarceration, gang-initiation, teenage parenthood, or some combination of these statuses. This manifested as both racism and ableism. These Black youth deemed with these disabilities were often ostracized within school settings by the school system and other youth, which many felt the need to escape this predicament. This reality occurred despite these Black youth exhibiting natural talents in their early childhood.

I recall my first year having a class of approximately 500 students; by my senior year, that number had plummeted to approximately 250 students on track to graduate on time. I now understand that the systemic racism that we endured as elementary school students attempting to apply our energy to activities after school had affected not only our self-identity but also our ability to envision ourselves thriving beyond limited future options often associated with Black youth in mainstream media such as athletes, entertainers, gangbangers, or single parents. I realized that this mindset or belief within us, as Black youth, regarding limited options for future envisioning was an indication of oppression we experienced caused by systemic racism.

My limited notion of future envisioning my senior year of high school led me to invest my future hopes into the dream of playing college football on a scholarship. However, this dream would be turned into a nightmare that would shape my future existence. After my high school football season ended, I tragically fractured my toe while participating in a competitive flag football tournament. Although I had received offers to football at a few colleges, this injury prevented me from engaging in the physical requirements they required.

I had recently engaged in a conversation with my Mama, concluded with a perception that my parents did not have the resources to fund my college education without a scholarship. The combination of my injury, perceived lack of family resources, and oppression had not only

intensified my limited ability to envision an actualized future but also caused me to feel as though my dreams were deferred and in a state of desperation, with my back against the wall. This further emerged as interlocking oppression of racism and classism. I understood that many White youth and families in other community contexts were guided to navigate accessing resources to actualize future aspirations. Moreover, youth and families of varying ethnicities, who had higher socioeconomic class statuses did not have to worry about the struggle to cover costs associated with future aspirations.

The following artistic, poetic expression, entitled “Dreams Deferred: Back Against the Wall,” depicts how oppression shaped my decisions as a Black youth and its eventual effect on my future experiences. The artistic expression is followed by elicited photo reflections that illustrate my efforts as a varsity football player and high school (see figures 7 and 8).

Dreams Deferred: Back Against the Wall

“Ugh!” The penetrating pain pulsed from the base of my big toe

To the tip of my toenail,

Making my other toes feel nonexistent,

Reminiscing on the choices I had for my future before the “fracture,”

Fractured is a fitting description of the feeling of an injured Black youth

In his final year of high school

Who felt that college football... was the only way

He could pay for college...”at all.”

So, if "at all" ...Cost, then "at all" was...lost.

I remember the college cost conversation with my Mama.

And she basically said, “Well, son, you did have a college fund, but some things

came up, and we had to dip in..."

And I'm thinking I'm trippin' because in my mind, all I heard was
"Bobo, we ain't got nothing to put on yo' college; you are on your own!"

On my own? I mean, on my own, I held my own in the classroom,

Even won awards, Ann Brannon, National Heisman,

All-District Academic Team,

3.5 GPA, Top 10 Percent, Cum Laude solid!

Even made the Who's Who,

But who knew, none of that would

be enough for somebody to pay for me to go to college.

I heard we perish for the lack of knowledge,

Or in other words, the lack of knowledge often kills the confidence of kids

who lack the consistent resources and guidance to help them develop

their VISION for their Future and the Plan to Pursue It,

Just Do It, that's What Nike said,

But it's not that simple of a situation

When the commercials aimed at Black youth exploitation,

Don't provide tools for navigation to destinations

That builds wealth and legacy for future generations

Long after high school graduation,

And graduation was just a few months away,

The Real World and Real Life were getting Real Close,

They say Reality can be a hard pill to swallow, well I was getting a Real dose!

In Real Pain, push the pressure down on the crutches to stand on my good foot,

The doorbell rang,

“Who is it?”

“What up foo’!”

It was my boy since 3rd grade, we been cool,

He was known as a “hothead”, but I understood

because I knew what he’d been through,

Estranged family relationships, him and his big bro fending for themselves,

But now we both found ourselves facing the same issue,

See he was a super talented athlete, one of the best in the city,

Gritty, quick, and fast, and played big even as a short dude,

Problem was bro had a “short fuse.”

And when you make it a habit to throw punches

And not just passes in games you eventually find yourself

Off the team, No team

Dream Deferred,

Now that makes two,

“Hey, I was talking to this dude from the Marines, and I told him about you,”

About Who?” I responded.

Still despondent, disappointed, desperate but with a lil’ dose of determination,

They say determination and desperation can either bless or distress

Depending on the situation,

Unfortunately for us we lacked the information for effective navigation,

“Yea he asked when we were coming down to the recruiting station.”

“What you say?”

“Today!”

See, a month prior, this would have been a laughable conversation,
But the pain in my foot, back against the wall, and future in shambles,

Opened everything up for serious consideration,

Even for a path that I had never considered before,

See before this, it was football and journalism,

You know, writing and stuff,

Not camouflage, boots, and war,

You know, fighting and stuff.

And a lot of stuff came out of the recruiter’s mouth,

But all I heard was “30K for college” which I connected to

The college cost conversation with my Mama,

I’m thinking, this solves the economic drama

Associated with the Associates, Bachelor’s and beyond,

Beyond that, my boy and I would be in the buddy program together through bootcamp!

“So, Mama, what you think about that?”

“Bobo, what the heck are you thinking?” Mama replied with a tone beyond dramatic,

More like traumatic!

“Bobo, you can go to UNT and do journalism” My Daddy added, although he had been in
the Army, however on a different path.

Suddenly a flood of tears stormed down my Mama’s face.

“I told you we would figure the college costs out” She expressed in despair.

But I already had.

Serve a term in the Marines get out and boom, college paid for!

And plus, my boy was going to bootcamp with me,

Eventually they accepted it and Mama said she would pray for me,

Now, as for my boy going to bootcamp with me, that became a different story.

To make it short, we signed all the paperwork,

And went down to take the ASVAB to seal our military fate,

But 10 minutes into the test he leaped up and ran out like he was on a hot plate,

With hot feet, the streets became his destiny,

I was confused, but I stayed and gave that test the best of me,

I guess our destinies parted ways with split decisions,

Let's just say when I shipped off to Marine Corps bootcamp,

My childhood friend...he was shipped off to prison.

This period of my adolescence was stressful. I was a senior in high school who on the outside seemed to be well rounded with a bright future. I was a team captain on the football team, good at basketball, had a solid grade point average, was popular and well-liked, had a functional car to drive, with two loving parents and family. However, as the safety and comfort of high school was ending, I had a major case of what many call “senior-itis.” This meant that as a senior in high school who was guaranteed to graduate on time, I began to drastically decrease my work ethic as a student and put more effort into my social life.

I began to engage in a practice called “skipping.” The concept of skipping meant that instead of attending the classes that I was enrolled in I would go to alternate locations during my

class periods, such as going home, a friend's house or even hanging out in another class. I recall a conversation with my parenting class teacher in which she stopped me in the school hallway:

“Hey Mr. Lockett, will I see you in my class today?” Mrs. Seahorn asked with a concerned look on her face.

“No, not today, but please don't mark me absent or fail because I am graduating already!” I replied with a smirk on my face, as though she owed me a favor.

I became so apathetic about my present life that I stopped doing some of the things that had been my strengths throughout my childhood and adolescence, such as reading and creative writing. As previously, When I was in elementary school, I was one of the few students who became excited when the opportunity to read aloud in class came along. I felt a sense of confidence when my name was called to read a sentence, paragraph, or entire page. It felt like I was on center stage with the spotlight on, and the world was watching. I would pour my best effort into pronouncing every word and syllable with eloquence and clarity. I was loud, assertive, and bold in the arena of words. Even though I did not feel as confident in math, it was the early praise that I received from teachers and peers in reading and writing that bolstered my willingness to work harder in math to uphold the notion of being characterized as a “smart” student.

However, through my journey through middle school and high school that positive feedback for my theatrical read-aloud performances decreased and became labeled as “clowning.” I recall a White teacher who taught a government class, who would discourage my reading style and would often skip over me. As a result, I would respond to this treatment by making “witty” and creative responses to the literature that would make other students laugh,

which infuriated this teacher. Subsequently, I would often be put out of class and sit at a desk in the hallway.

I recall on this one day being removed from class, it happened to be the lone “college fair” day where various college representatives would come to speak with high school juniors and seniors about attending college. Unfortunately for me I was unable to attend the college fair because of my punishment for my “creative expressions” in class. However, while sitting in the hallway, I spotted the name tag of a representative from Texas Southern University, which is a historically Black university in Houston, Texas, that I had heard of because a few of my friends expressed that they may enroll there after graduation.

I had made up my mind that since I could not attend the college fair, I was going to introduce myself to this college representative regardless of my situation.

“Excuse me, sir, are you from Texas Southern?” I asked even though his name badge stated that information, but I had to break the ice.

“Yes, I am, and what is your name, son?” The college rep replied, looking down at me because I was still seated at a desk in the hallway.

“My name is Junichi Lockett, and uhh...” I began to answer, hoping to express my positive attributes before he could ask the question attached to the 800-pound gorilla seated at a desk next to me, but it was too late.

“Son, why are you seated outside of the classroom when there are other students seated inside of the classrooms?” he asked with a stern look on his face.

“Well, I want to go to college; I am an A-B student and was on the All-Academic Scholar-Athlete team during football season, and...” I began presenting but was cut off at mid-sentence.

“Yea, but you are not in class.” He countered and walked away without another word.

While I tried to downplay what this encounter meant to me internally, I realized that it was another dimmer in the light that I was losing towards my perceived future. The college cost conversation had recently happened with my mama, which was connected to my aspirations to attend college at Clark Atlanta University (CAU) in Atlanta, Georgia. I had spent six weeks in a camp just the summer before my senior year. While that summer camp at CAU was one of the best experiences of my childhood or adolescence, and I was excited about attending there as an undergraduate, I perceived attending there as impossible without a scholarship.

Privileges

Not only was I “skipping” out on classes to engage in social behaviors, but I was among many Black students who were engaging in this behavior. While many began skipping classes well before their senior year, I ponder on what factors contributed to this disconnect in their minds between the concept of formal education and its perceived impact on their futures. Had they also, at some point, been discouraged from expressing their strengths, talents, and abilities, thus leading them to engage in unproductive and even high-risk behaviors, such as street gang membership, selling illegal narcotics, engaging in sexual promiscuity, etc... While I was guaranteed to graduate regardless of the classes I missed, I realized through this conscious critique that many of my classmates who were participating in skipping were not on track to graduate from high school, nor did they have an alternative plan for their lives, including adjusting to joining the military as I did. I further recognized that I held a privilege that may have allowed me, as an able-bodied male in this society, to make the mental and physical transition from playing competitive sports to engaging in the physical and mental rigors of military training

and service. This is due to the practice of many youth males being taught to be “tough” and not to “cry,” which aligns with the belief system characterized in the military.



Figure 7. In Pursuit. Image of me as a varsity football player in my senior year of high school.

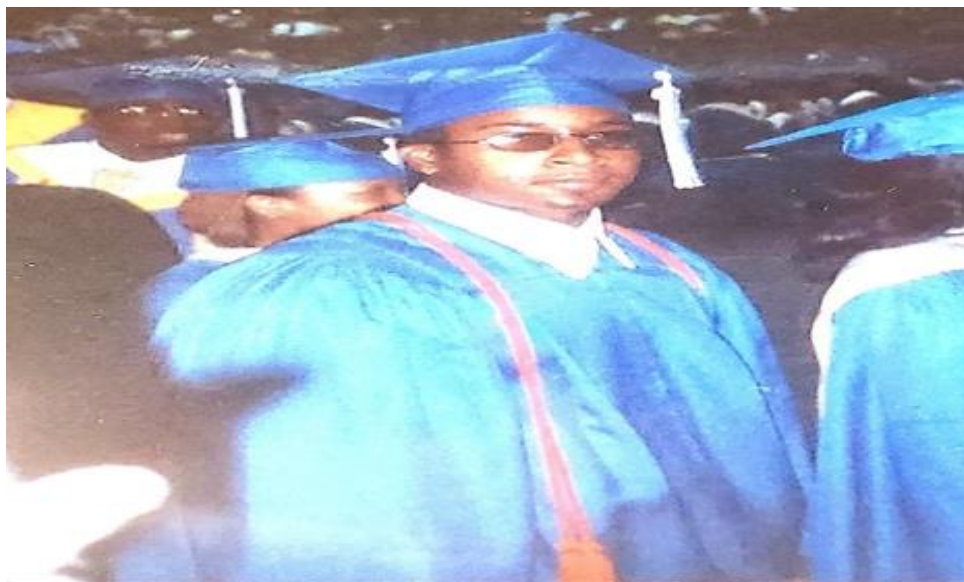


Figure 8. Walking into Uncertainty. A photo of me was taken at my high school graduation ceremony just before walking across the stage.

The following section encompasses quotes from a critical discussion between Mama and me. We both engaged in a collaborative critique of power, oppression, and privileges from my experiences as a Black youth in correlation with her own.

Coach J: Yes. So, for me, I want to understand how that, because you said, "I went into an entry-level position, and we had some issues trying to get the house," and then how possibly that, the way you had to shift from what you said you wanted to be in the journalism, or you want to be a reporter and it feels somewhere. But what the circumstance, I guess you hadn't to say that yet, what was the circumstances that you had why you shifted to something else.

Mama: With the supplies and the things that I needed because you must learn about the weather and you instruments required and all that stuff to purchase, and we didn't have it. So, I said, well, okay, it would cost a lot of (money) way back then. So, I said, well, I guess I can get into education.

Coach J: Okay.

Mama: So, that's when I went and changed my major. It was supposed to be a high school counselor and psychologist. So I went that route while studying, and then after I graduated, I went into retail because that was the first job that came, and I got it. So, for six and a half years, I worked there and then went into banking and applied at the post office. So, all of that is still I didn't focus on the education. Because you had to have, even after graduating, to be a high school counselor, you had to have your master's.

Coach J: Yes, and then you disconnected from journalism too...

Mama: I disconnected all the way because I was looking at the finances.

Coach J: Yes, so that's the part that, okay, so what I'm looking at, I'm looking at.

Mama: Because to me, that relates to what you did.

Coach J: Yes. So, we're looking at systems of oppression, power, privileges, see, if economics prevented you from doing that. You're thinking about what could have been in place for you too, because if you say, "Hey, I'm passionate about becoming a journalist," you would think that there would be something that could help you take on or pursue what you were passionate about.

Mama: But because I didn't further investigate to see if there was a program, if it was something I could work toward if there were loans, not loans but grants or whatever; I didn't pursue all of that because in my mind, as in your mind, I can't afford this...

But with me, all I can think about, as you did, is to say, they can't afford it, so I'm going to something that they can, but I don't even remember asking them. All I had to do was say, mama, I want to be a journalist; I must learn the weather, I must know just everything they do, writing, all of that. And that part I had, but I just, as I said, the supplies of the time, I guess, all of that, so myself, I did not trust myself to explore other avenues or opportunities to make that happen for me.

Coach J: Nor did you have to know what could have happened, and you didn't have the guidance. So, for youth, 18, 19 years old, and you probably had been thinking about it since you were a teenager or whatever before that, what's in place to help guide that thinking. You start thinking about it earlier; okay, you start to show your ability to communicate and explain and report; where is the program that identifies you.

Mama: And I was nosy.

Coach J: Nosy, you want to know what's going on and investigate.

Mama: If I saw a fire truck or police or whatever, I was just curious.

Coach J: So, that's my critique of power, privilege, and oppression because who were the kids that did get a chance to pursue journalism and report, everything that you wanted to do? Who were these kids, and why were they able to afford the equipment and tap into the resources?

Mama: They may have had resources from the beginning, but they either had it or knew what avenues, but I didn't.

Coach J: Yeah. There were probably many people who cared about you than there were understood how to navigate these different systems and stuff.

Mama: Oh, well, they have over on the west side, you could go to this program about, and they give away toys or you can for your education, you want to be, like you're doing with your children. One of them wants to be a veterinarian, the other wants to be in technology, so y'all take them to colleges or schools to let them see. You have a resource, that's your drive, it's no excuse, you got this, you have things that will help you; we didn't have that.

Coach J: Well, what brought me to the conclusion is that when we talked about the kind of college savings account, you said, well, we had to tap into it a little.

Mama: Yeah, we had to dip into it, but it wasn't going to affect you; when I said that, that's where your mind went; they can't afford it, I must go to the military. And then you I was like, oh no, just give us a chance; give us a chance, mama y'all can't afford it. So, in my mindset, I was at the altar every weekend, every Sunday I was on the altar, it looked like my stomach was nuts, every weekend, if you were here, I was okay, but when you left, oh my God, that was it. And then he wanted to put you in a combat unit, I said, why all the Black boys must go to combat, and I know many White boys want to go to combat.

In this component of the critical discussion with Mama, we delve into her perspective of my parents' perceptions of not being able to afford my college education without me earning a scholarship and my decision to enlist in the Marines. While my Mama expressed that this was a very frustrating and anxious period, she expressed that she had a level of empathy for my sentiments because she had experienced the same situation regarding her college and career choices. Everyone that knows my Mama, from family to friends, knows that my mama is naturally "nosy," "investigative," and loves to report what is happening. Consequently, she aspired to become a journalist and was positioned to pursue this career path through her college journey. However, because she also perceived her family's economic situation to be insufficient to afford the equipment and materials costs that were associated with journalism at the time, she took an alternative path.

This critical discussion with Mama, as a collaborative critique of power, oppressions and privileges in this study, further aided in my realization that Mama's decision to choose an alternative career path contrary to her identified interests and natural abilities as a result her family's socio-economic status also triggered a chain reaction that impacted my experience as a Black youth: (a) Mama spent several years after graduating college in lower-paying employment attempting to identify a perceived feasible career path, then; (b) she married my Daddy, who had experienced similar socio-economic circumstances as Mama in his childhood and adolescence, and also held a lower-paying position; (c) my parents' collective socio-economic status dictated their perception of the community that they could afford to or was comfortable living in, which they chose Stop Six/Eastwood, a Black community affected by the external forces as systemic racism previously discussed; (d) as I got older in my childhood, along with the discovery that my Daddy had fathered my older half-sister, Misty, and had to pay child support, the perception of the

need to increase socio-economic capacity to sustain economic survival of the family was exacerbated, thus; (e) Mama pursued a career at the United States Postal Service, and Daddy pursued second jobs outside of his primary welding job, which he also often worked overtime, as a result; (f) I spent many evenings at extended family and neighbors homes and became a latchkey kid who had to walk home afterschool to an empty house because of the conflicting schedule with my daddy's overtime work, along with Mama's shift change at the post office, as she began getting promoted, which included working on most weekends, consequently; (g) I, along with many other Black youth were subjected to the lack of development opportunities, while also; (g) due to work, Mama was unable to attend most of my sporting events and other pivotal moments of maturation through my childhood and adolescence. In facilitating this critical discussion, I accrued the awareness that this chain reaction resulting from our socio-economic status in my childhood may have contributed to complicating our mother and son relationship and the communication struggles that persist.

Critique of Power, Privileges and Oppressions and My Approach to Black Youth

Empowerment

Through this autoethnographic study, I realized that the critique of power, privileges, and oppressions, from which the concept of understanding socio-economic and political factors emerged, informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming in various ways. Firstly, I bolstered my understanding that the concept of power being exerted through utilizing external forces such as mainstream socio-cultural socialization and systemic and intuitional policymaking is the manifestation of systemic racism that creates oppression upon Black youth and families and privileges as benefits for White youth and families, especially those exerting power. This understanding justifies the need in my approach to leading Black

youth empowerment to (a) maintain a holistic view of the socio-economic statuses of Black youth and families to avoid judging their potential based on it; (b) guide youth in leading critiques of power, privilege, and oppressions to bolster understanding of how it affects them and to prevent judging or to view themselves and others based on socio-economic status; (c) guide youth in understanding and formulating counter-strategies to address socio-economic and political factors that affect Black youth, families and community settings, which fosters their potential to lead efforts to transform Black community settings.

Conclusion

This chapter encompassed a discussion of the findings that emerged in this autoethnographic study: (a) Black resilience, (b) epiphany, and (c) understanding socio-economic and political factors. To illustrate how these findings surfaced from addressing the research questions, I provided descriptive narratives, artistic short stories and poetic expressions, photo elicitations and reflections, and quotes from a critical discussion with a participant who experienced and observed my experiences as a Black youth growing up in a primarily Black community setting. I discussed how addressing each research question informed my Black youth empowerment programming approach. Furthermore, I provided an opening narrative to embody the beginnings of my journey from “behind the gate” toward engaging in Black youth empowerment programming.

I advance this creative exploration of my journey to Black youth empowerment to every Black woman, man, and child as a call for each of us to take the time to reflect, inventory, and unapologetically value our lived experiences through whatever methods we perceive necessary, which holds distinct potential to affect transformational and sustainable change in our communities across the diaspora. In this chapter, I sought to be an example of leading that

mandate by embracing vulnerability, regardless of difficulty and discomfort, and unveiling my lived experiences through artistic expression. The following chapter provides a conclusive discussion of this study, implications for practical recommendations, future research, and a conclusive epilogue.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

“It Takes a Whole Village to Raise a Child.” African Proverb

I unapologetically approached this closing chapter from a Black liberation perspective as a member of the collective that must carry the weight to actualize the potential impact infused in the following discussion, implications for practical implementations, boundaries, a future research prospectus, and conclusion on the current state and future envisioning of Black youth empowerment work.

My journey as a Black youth growing up in a Black community was inundated with many experiences that eventually led me to the opportunity to lead Black youth empowerment programming. The following artistic short story expression is purposed to depict my entry point into Black youth empowerment programming after my journey from being a Black youth growing up in a primarily Black community setting.

Digging the First Trench: My Initiation into Pipeline to Power Building

I could feel the sweat on my palms as I stood in front of a group of about 15 Black youth in a classroom at Tarrant County College. Although I had not yet graduated from my undergraduate studies at the University of Texas at Arlington, I had become so passionate about affecting change to help Black youth, families, and communities in my hometown that I had been diligently engaging in community events such as town hall meetings, forums, volunteer opportunities, which positioned me to meet people who were also concerned with the improvement of the Black community in Fort Worth. Consequently, I met another Black man who had held similar interests as I did in positively impacting the lives of Black youth. He had created a partnership with an elder Black woman, whom she and her husband were well known

locally for their work with Black youth, to reignite a youth development program called “Images in the Mirror,” which would be held at the local community college in Fort Worth, Texas.

The organizers of this program had recruited Black youth from across the city to participate in this leadership development program focused on helping them build and strengthen a positive identity to bolster their positive influence on and relationships with their peers and families, in which I also enrolled my younger brother (see figure 9). While I had volunteered to assist with the facilitation of the program, I didn’t realize at that moment that the exhilaration of leading Black youth empowerment would become something I would experience soon than expected. I had garnered a significant amount of experience speaking in front of and leading development workshops with college-level youth over my undergraduate years. However, this would be the first time I was directly engaging in the minds of those youth struggling to navigate some of the same obstacles of childhood and adolescence that I had just a generation earlier.

Just that morning before the next youth leadership session, the lead facilitator, who had hired me to assist him, informed me that he would no longer be able to facilitate that program and that the only way the program could continue was for me to take the lead in facilitating the program. Although I understood that this opportunity was aligned with the declaration, I made to impact Black youth, I again felt that feeling of uncertainty that I had felt in both high school and in the Iraqi desert when my future was in question. However, I was again struck by the energetic essence of epiphany as I remembered the external forces and people that led me up to this point, from A.M. Pate, Stop Six/Eastwood, middle and high school, Marine Corps to college, fatherhood, back into my community. My inner drive again revved up like a diesel engine. My consciousness compelled me to extraneously express determination in myself as an illuminating

example of the Black resilience that I must identify as strengths in the young Black minds that sat before me.

I scanned the room full of the faces of potential greatness, which I understood would have to courageously critique the concept of power, privileges, and oppressions ingrained in this society as I had. They would also have to consciously build the critical capacity to envision thriving futures while understanding and navigating socio-economic and political factors to foster transformative impact for their families, communities, and future generations. This moment reinforced my realization that I must intensely immerse my intensity into bolstering empowerment in Black youth to become everything that our ancestors envisioned and more. Unleashing a deep breath, a burst of competent confidence caused me to step forward and begin actualizing that purpose.

“How ya’ll feel!” I yelled exuberantly as my tone of voice sparked many youths to sit up and conjure a response.

“Fired up!” One Black youth responded in connection with the energy that I led with.

The others looked around and then back at me in anticipation of asking the introductory question again.

“How ya’ll feel!” I repeated with even more vigor, feeding off the spirit of their anticipation.

Their fiery response represented the digging of the trench necessary to join the battle to build a pipeline to power for Black youth. Welcome to the battlefield, Warrior!



Figure 9. Initiation into Pipeline to Power Building. Image of Certificate following completion of leading my first Black youth empowerment program.

The purpose of this art-based autoethnographic study was to explore the influences and experiences that informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming.

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How did external forces and people inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming?
2. How did my inner drive and consciousness inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming?
3. How does a critique of power, privileges, and oppressions of my experiences inform my approach to leading Black youth empowerment programming?

Discussion

As a Black youth growing up in the primarily Black community of Stop Six/Eastwood, on the east side of Fort Worth, Texas, I never imagined that my experiences would significantly influence my purpose to engage in Black youth empowerment work. Conducting this

autoethnographic study to explore my journey from being a Black youth to leading Black youth empowerment programming has provided me valuable insights into how an intentional critical reflective examination of one's experiences can not only inform one's work intensely but also how it can invigorate both the appreciation and passion for continuing pursuing the more significant purpose within the work. Even though I was pushed to uncover my vulnerabilities within these experiences, which were often uncomfortable throughout the process, I feel that I gained a liberating understanding of myself and the mission I must intensify externally.

Whose Pipeline is it, Anyway?

This study further allowed me to take an introspective step back and apply symbolic meaning to my life's journey from childhood. While I was living my experiences as a Black youth, my frame of reference was limited to only the people, places, and things that I could hear, see, and touch in those moments. However, facilitating this autoethnography allowed me to step outside of those boundaries and conduct a critical investigation of the internal and external factors that influenced the nature of my journey through those experiences. Consequently, this process reinforced the notion of the "pipeline" as a symbolic representation of my sojourn. A physical pipeline is constructed with reinforced materials strong enough to guide and protect the opportunity for natural resources such as oil or gas, which is perceived as highly valuable, to flow from its origin to destinations in which it can provide energy as "power" for people to operate sustainably into the future.

In chapter 2 of this study, I discussed the notion that positive youth development requires the viewpoint that youth are valuable assets that deserve to be developed. In contrast, the empowerment-based approach to developing Black youth requires distinct intentionality of bolstering their protection against systemic inequities such as unfair disciplinary practices in

school settings (Lerner, 2005, Travis and Leech, 2014). Furthermore, I discussed the aspects of Black cultural and critical capital within Black community settings, as the people and entities that help Black youth navigate those systemic inequities (Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Thus, as a Black youth facilitator, I am compelled to consider these concepts collaboratively and boldly embrace the same perspective of the “pipeline” discussed previously and symbolically apply it to conceptualizing Black community contexts that are supposed to guide and protect the opportunity for Black youth to flow from their conception to their highest potential to produce sustainable power for generations to come.

Through exploring the “pipelines” that I and many other Black youths evolved or “flowed” through, guided by the research questions, I gained an understanding that for me to maximize the impact of this study on the field of Black youth empowerment, I must definitively answer the questions: (a) who controlled those pipelines, how and why; (b) in what ways did Black youth and families experience those pipelines, and (c) how can Black youth empowerment facilitators contribute to intensified efforts to protect and guide those pipelines to heighten actualization for Black youth, communities and future generations. Therefore, through maintaining an Afrocentric philosophical research approach to conduct this study as a member of the community being explored and the determination to investigate this notion of pipelines for Black youth (Reviere, 2001), I identified three cumulative findings that addressed the investigative questions and connected with the study’s purpose: (1) Black resilience, (2) epiphany, and (3) understanding socio-economic and political factors.

Flow Against the Current

While exploring the external forces and people that informed my approach to Black youth empowerment programming, many memories surfaced that evoked a mixture of emotions

and moments of deep reflection. The notion of Black resilience was salient throughout, as the pivotal people, both Black youth and adults, within my experiences, displayed the determination to survive and thrive despite the anti-Black external forces prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s in many urban Black communities, such as the demonization of Black people in mainstream media, and the proliferation of policies that exacerbated the criminalization and incarceration of Black youth and adults. This discovery within my experiences compared to the concept of Black resiliency displayed by Black kinship networks, which emerged during the enslavement of people of African descent, to foster Black youth development amid oppression (Illick, 2005; Hahn, 2003; Mintz, 1999; Raboteau).

The recognition of resilience in Black youth and communities, such as Tandy, and the Black adults in Stop Six/Eastwood, amid the presence of external forces, serves as a starting point for Black youth empowerment workers to identify strengths in Black youth to help guide future envisioning, while establishing and strengthening relationships with them and the community members connected to them. I realized that the finding of Black resilience surfaced even in my inclination to take a creative arts-based approach to this auto-ethnography to both honors my late Warrior Daddy, discussed in chapter 1, who I perceived sacrificed his artistic potential to assure that I actualized mine and as a counternarrative to traditional ways of presenting impactful research.

Found My Flow

Through exploring how my inner drive and consciousness informed my approach to leading Black youth empowerment, I gained insight into the potency of intrinsic analysis. Through facilitating this autoethnography, I was able to connect the mental and physical challenges that my Warrior Daddy posed on me to the cultivation of my inner drive or

motivation that I had to tap into in various parts of my life as I grew older. It was liberating to understand how my Warrior Daddy's influence in my early years persisted in impacting my fortitude even in his absence later in life. While my parents did not understand the theoretical tenets of empowerment-based positive youth development (EMPYD) for Black youth discussed in chapter 2 about Travis and Leech's (2014) model, I now comprehend how they bolstered my ability to master challenges by elevating my sense of connection, confidence, and competence. Consequently, the notion of strategically challenging Black youth both mentally and physically as a developmental approach serves as a logical next step to identifying their strengths, such as Black resilience. As a Black youth empowerment facilitator, I have used methods such as warrior self-defense or martial arts training and real-world problem solving or critical thinking activities to enrich their inner drive to prepare them for the obstacles that persist for Black youth. Moreover, the identification of strengths in Black youth assists in guiding their ability to envision and plan their future endeavors and impact.

The examination of the concept of consciousness as an influence in my journey in addressing the second research question exposed the gravity of my introduction to African-centered thought. The heightening of my awareness of the historical framework around my cultural identity as a Black youth and its connection to the political, economic, social, and physical contexts affecting not only my childhood Black community but also Black people and communities on a national and international scale, provided a sense of purpose and direction for me to apply my inner drive to (Asante, 1980). According to Damon's study of purpose (2008), when youth gain a keen awareness of a greater purpose, they internally feel compelled to pursue it, it has the potential to supersede their own self-focused needs. I gained comprehension of how my purpose extended beyond myself to hold potential impact on the diaspora of Black people

globally, as discussed in chapter 2 in reference to the work of Carmichael (1969) and Woodson (1990).

While this perceived process of “awakening” my consciousness often evoked various emotions from inspiration, disbelief, anger, to even a sense of disappointment in the adults who I thought were supposed to teach me about my cultural identity and history, including my parents and the school system, my maturation helped me to recalibrate my focus back on my life’s purpose. Lloyd and Williams (2017) argue that taking the same culturally relevant approach within Black youth empowerment work by providing opportunities to spark the alignment of inner drive and consciousness with purpose within Black youth has shown promising results in this population.

Shift the Flow

The critique of power, oppressions, and privileges that I was challenged to conduct in addressing the third research question of this study uncovered the importance of understanding socio-economic and political factors surrounding Black youth empowerment work. After identifying strengths as Black resilience, and sparking inner drive and consciousness, my approach to engaging in an intentional critique of power within society that formulates both oppressions and privileges affecting Black youth and communities was better informed. According to Travis and Leech (2014) the need to take an empowerment-based approach to developing Black youth is linked to persisting factors of institutional inequities. Therefore, after my awareness of my strengths, cultural identity and history as a Black youth was boosted, I felt more equipped from a Black worldview to comprehensively critique the complexities that characterize the American and global societies. Consequently, my burgeoning understanding of socio-economic and political factors helps me to approach my work through a critical lens

highlighted in chapter 1 in discussing the purpose of critical consciousness work forwarded by Freire (1970, 1993), with an empathetic perspective that centers the objective of Black empowerment and liberation over Black condemnation discussed through the work of Karenga (1989). Furthermore, it helps me in understanding how to navigate and counter the exertions of external systems and institutions that have a history of exacerbating negative outcomes for Black youth, such as the “school to prison” pipeline propagated by public school and juvenile justice systems (Fabelo et al., 2011; Kim & Geronimo, 2009; Losen, 2011).

Building Pipeline to Power Builders

The foremost recommendation for practice to be forwarded from this study is that Black youth empowerment facilitators must prioritize pursuing opportunities to bolster their understanding of their journeys to this work. While many of the individuals who work with Black youth often identify their work through various terminologies such as mentoring, youth development, and advocacy, the findings of this study revealed that intentional exploration of their own lived experiences as Black youth has the potential to boost awareness and enhance their approach to aiding Black youth. Therefore, I recommend that Black youth programming facilitators increase engagement in professional development that builds competency in (a) understanding critical consciousness development, which equips facilitators to utilize critical reflective methods to bolster critical agency or socio-political efficacy, thus leading to informed critical actions towards advancing their efforts. Moreover, through building competency in critical consciousness development, Black youth empowerment facilitators will strengthen their ability to identify strengths and challenges within themselves, which may have persisted from their experiences as Black youth, to enhance their senses of self-awareness and empathy that may inform their approach to their work; (b) understanding African-centered perspectives of

historical and current contexts affecting Black populations, which cultivates the Black liberation lens needed to undergird their critical consciousness development with cultural relevancy to Black youth populations and their community settings.

This cultural competency nurtures the ability of Black youth empowerment facilitators to navigate the distinct societal factors affecting Black youth while better guiding and equipping Black youth to navigate and thrive beyond these factors into envisioned futures; and (c) understand training methods that challenge the mental and physical durability of Black youth such as self-defense/martial arts training and real-world problem solving or critical thinking activities. These methods can be used in Black youth empowerment work to strengthen the inner drive of Black youth while preparing them for the obstacles that persist for Black youth into their futures.

I further challenge Black youth empowerment facilitators to partner with Black researchers and/or build research competency through professional development or academic training provided by Black research professionals to guide Black youth in engaging youth participatory action research that centers critical consciousness development with an African Centered-Black liberation lens. The intensified practice of this approach to youth participation action research activated by Black youth empowerment facilitators may foster: (a) opportunities to identify strengths, such as Black resilience, and challenges, such as being negatively characterized in mainstream media, which may undergird relationship building with and vision development for Black youth; (b) opportunities for collaborative research, discussion, planning and transformational actions to strengthen Black youth and communities, while countering systemic inequities affecting these populations; and (c) an increased potential of sustainability in the Black youth empowerment field as more Black youth heighten their critical consciousness

development, thus fostering their sense of responsibility to advance Black youth and community empowerment efforts into future generations.

Future research

More research is needed to examine the influence of critical consciousness development methods on Black youth empowerment facilitators, as conducted in this autoethnographic study. As an extension to this study, ethnographic research exploring the journey of Black youth workers through childhood, adolescence, into adulthood that utilizes critical reflection to understand how their lived experiences influenced their critical efficacy and critical actions towards Black youth empowerment work provides opportunities for valuable insight to advance this work.

Also, Black researchers should forward the intensification of youth participation action research that includes an African-centered-Black liberation critical conscious development approach to examine Black youth's perceptions of the influence of the people and external forces in their lives on their ability to (a) envision actualized futures, and (b) develop plans to navigate obstacles towards their actualized future. I propose youth participatory action research that allows Black youth to facilitate critical self-reflection of their lived experiences, which may aid them to identify their intrinsic notions of Black resilience and inner drive.

Moreover, this approach to youth participatory action research will afford Black youth the opportunity to perform collaborative critical analysis of the aspects of power, oppression and privileges that affect the socio-economic well-being of their families and communities. Critical discussion circles should be activated to allow Black youth to synergize their perspectives collectively. Consequently, through bolstering their knowledge and understanding of systemic factors, Black youth may advance pragmatic solutions that aid Black community transformation.

Lastly, I propose an approach to youth participatory action research that challenges Black youth to consider technological innovations such as artificial intelligence, digital currency, smart technology, virtual reality and beyond to investigate their potential influence on revolutionizing approaches to Black youth empowerment and Black community transformation efforts that may impact future generations of Black youth.

Back to the Future...Generations

“Coach J, thank you for meeting with me in these final moments.” A brown-skinned girl expressed her gratitude, as she stood at my bedside.

“I’m not sure if you remember me but I was one of the youth organizers of the 50th anniversary festival to celebrate the opening of the first Pipeline to Power center for Empowerment and Community Building, at which you were the keynote speaker.

Opening my eyes wider, I examined the familiar face. While I had forgotten a lot of faces over the century that I’d experienced on this planet, the radiant energy of this Black youth was unmistakable.

“Baadaye!” I responded with a smile, as a hint of enthusiasm spurted through my body.

“Yes, it’s me, and many also call me Ebony Futura or just Future for short!” she responded in excitement as she sat in a floating chair that she pulled out of her pocket.

“I am now a doctoral candidate in the Black Youth Futurism Studies department at the Uhuru University of Stop Six completing the final chapter of my dissertation to graduate!” She continued in elation.

“My research is in Cosmic Black Youth Empowerment Innovations!” Futura expressed, as suddenly a levitating smart hologram screen appeared before us displaying her research study.

I seemed to fall into a state of euphoria as she scrolled through interactive images of Black youth collaboratively leading their own education and development. These brilliant young minds planned, designed, and utilized various types of technological innovations such as artificial intelligence, digital currency, and virtual reality to construct Black community realities that transcended time and space. This included the development of galactic applications that would allow Black youth and families to visit outer space. Moreover, Future illustrated how these revolutionary approaches to Black youth empowerment had such a catalytic impact on the consciousness of Black youth and their propensity to maximize the potency and sustainability of Black community settings across the diaspora that the systemic external forces that formulated the plaguing oppressions, that I had grappled with through my childhood, adolescence and years fighting for the empowerment of Black youth, could no longer have a persisting effect on the full potential development of Black youth.

Futura halted her presentation as though she sensed that her time with me was waning. She leaned in to pose one final question as tears began flowing down her round cheeks.

“Coach J, what inspired you and others to commit your entire lives to Black youth empowerment work?” she asked, grasping my hand and pulling it closer.

An invigorated smile stretched the boundaries of my more than a century old face, as I undertook the final critical reflection of my life, while looking into Future’s eyes.

“You did.” I uttered, as I took my final breath.

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