

ADDRESSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP:
AN EXPLORATION OF A COMMUNITY YOUTH PROGRAM FOR BLACK CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Brionca Taylor: Addressing the Achievement Gap: An Exploration of a Community Youth Program for Black Children
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The academic achievement gap and the potential causes of racial inequalities in education remain an important topic in society today. Scholars have assessed oppositional culture, school structure and interactions, and the role of parental involvement in school settings. Despite a focus on the larger cultural basis for Black student opposition to education, we know little about the attempts that the Black community has made to address the academic achievement gap. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I examined Bright Start Youth Program, a community program that serves elementary-aged Black children from a predominantly white school district. Findings show that Bright Start operated as a counterspace for Black children that engaged in narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions to help Black children navigate predominantly white classroom spaces. At the same time, ideas of oppositional culture remained present. Program staff and volunteers also saw the children as capable of achieving academic success, but lacking an interest in school. Program activities were largely centered around Black boys who were seen as most in need of attention and discipline. This study demonstrates that colorblind ideology continues to persist in spaces that challenge dominant narratives and racial stereotypes, suggesting that counterspaces unintentionally mirror the same institutions they attempt to contrast.

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Black students...appear to have the ability to do well in school, [but]...they choose to avoid adopting attitudes and putting in enough time and effort in their schoolwork because their peers...would interpret their behaviors as “White”.

Fordham and Ogbu 1986, p.187

[We] find that institutional and interpersonal/everyday discrimination are persistent factors in school outcomes....[T]hese practices contribute to different school experiences and...translate into different outcomes for [Blacks and Whites].

Lewis and Diamond 2015, p.114

INTRODUCTION

The academic achievement gap and the potential causes of racial inequality on education remain an important topic today. To date, studies focused on the relative impact of race and culture in shaping the academic achievement gap have examined the school setting (Ferguson 2000; Blau 2003; Lewis 2003; Tyson 2011; Lewis-McCoy 2014; Lewis and Diamond 2015) and the attitudes and experiences of parents and students (Lewis and Forman 2002; Tyson 2002; Tyson 2011; Robinson and Harris 2014). Despite a focus on the larger cultural basis for Black student opposition to education, we know little about the role of the Black community in shaping the academic achievement gap. Since oppositional culture posits that Black students learn values and behaviors that hinder their achievement from their family, peers, and community, it is necessary to examine the role of the community and its constituent organizations in shaping the orientations of Black students.

As long-run educational disparities are often rooted in early elementary school (Ferguson 2000; Tyson 2002; Lewis 2003; Quinn 2015), this study investigates the experiences of elementary school students. Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic observations and supplementary semi-structured interviews, I examine a community after-school program that serves elementary-aged Black children. I began by using the definition of a ‘counterspace’ developed by Case and Hunter (2012) to assess the program as a potential counterspace for Black children who attend predominantly white public schools. The community program

exhibited narratives of identity work by constantly referring to the children as scholars to change perceptions of the academic capability of the children. Informal conversations and sneakers and Black hair demonstrated acts of resistance for the children. Direct relational transactions were used by the program director and program volunteers to give the elementary children material and social skills they deemed necessary to be academically successful. At the same time, ideas of oppositional culture remained present. Program staff and volunteers saw the children as capable of achieving academic success, but lacking the cultural resources as well as an interest in educational orientations that were necessary to succeed in school. Black parents and families of the participants were depicted as barriers to the educational progress of Black children, portraying Bright Start as not only a counterspace to the environment of predominantly white schools, but also a counterspace to the home environment of Black children. The program also perpetuated gendered notions of racial inequalities, positing Black boys as naturally deviant and in need of more attention and discipline. Black girls, at various times, were seen as immature, temporary troublemakers, or distractions to Black boys. Unlike Black boys in the program, the unique needs of Black girls were largely invisible throughout the time spent with the program. The following questions were used to guide my research: (1) What are the experiences of Black children in Black community youth programs? (2) What explanations do Black parents and youth program workers have for the racial academic achievement gap? (3) Given these explanations, how do Black community youth programs attempt to address the academic achievement gap?

Over time, scholars have offered different theories to explain the continued existence of the academic achievement gap. The most widely accepted theories implicate cultural differences between Blacks and Whites. For instance, Ogbu and colleagues (Ogbu 1978; Fordham and Ogbu

1986) advance a cultural perspective, which asserts that Black students learn an oppositional orientation towards schooling from their families and communities and that this orientation is responsible for the achievement gap. They maintain that a collective cultural attitude toward education for Blacks “evolved during many generations when White Americans insisted that [Blacks] were incapable of academic success, denied them the opportunity to succeed academically, and did not reward them adequately when they succeeded” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986:183). Given that returns to education are more ideal for Whites than Blacks, Black students learned to associate educational achievement with Whiteness and “acting White.” This orientation puts Black students and notions of ‘Blackness’ at odds with the school environment and academic achievement, leading to the underachievement of Black students.

Several scholars have responded to this perspective with a focus on the racialized nature of blocked opportunities in education (Tyson 2002, 2011; Ferguson 2000; Blau 2003; Lewis 2003; Diamond 2006; Frankenburg 2013; Lewis-McCoy 2014; Mickelson 2015). That is, some argue that schools are institutions which reflect and actively perpetuate racial inequalities in society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Blau 2003; Lewis 2003; Harris 2011; Lewis and Diamond 2015). Despite the academic aspirations of any student, divergent stereotypes about Black and White students and their families shape experiences and treatment in schools, including the experience of anti-Black racial discrimination shared by many Black students (Tyson 2002; Lewis 2003; Lewis-McCoy 2014; Lewis and Diamond 2015). Black students are more likely to receive detention and be suspended from school than White students (Ferguson 2000; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2016). They are also less likely to be recommended for advanced courses in school (Tyson 2011). According to this perspective, Black students value education but racialized blocked opportunities hinder their academic success.

Race, Culture, and the Achievement Gap

According to ‘post-racial’ conceptions of society, racial disparities in education are a result of Black students not taking advantage of educational resources and opportunities that schools provide (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Black families and communities teach Black students to devalue educational achievement and to develop an oppositional orientation to school (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fordham 1996; Ogbu 2003, 2008). Although scholars have provided evidence that Black students experience racial discrimination in schools and racial disparities in education are reproduced through structural barriers (Lewis 2003; Diamond 2006; Tyson 2011; Brown 2013; Lewis-McCoy 2014; Lewis and Diamond 2015), the academic achievement gap continues to be widely attributed to the cultural characteristics of Blacks.

Working within this larger post-racial narrative, Ogbu developed what has been termed oppositional culture theory¹ as a way to explain racial inequalities in education. He later proposes that the low school performance of Black students is an adaptive strategy to racialized blocked opportunities Black students expect to experience (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fordham 1988, 1996; Ogbu and Simmons 1998; Ogbu 2003, 2008). According to this view, as Black people experience discrimination and lack of opportunities in the labor market, Black students have become disillusioned with the benefits of education. Blacks believe that education only rewards Whites and, therefore, view academic success among their peers as ‘acting White.’ Using in-depth interviews of eight Black students at Capital High in Washington, DC, Fordham and Ogbu examine the strategies high and low achieving students use to “[cope] with the burden of ‘acting White’” in school (1986, p. 186). Low achieving students at the predominantly Black high school were shown to have the academic ability to do well in school, yet they were shown

¹ John U. Ogbu’s 1978 ‘cultural-ecological theory’ is today commonly referred to as the ‘oppositional culture theory’ and will be done so throughout this paper.

to use disengagement as a strategy to deter Black peers from labeling them as ‘acting White.’ Many of the low achieving students expressed that they lacked support from teachers and school administrators at Capital High while at the same time attributing their lack of academic success to their individual lack of effort on homework and in the classroom.

Although they did well in school, high achieving Black students in the sample reported that they minimized their academic achievements in order to be accepted by their peers. Fordham and Ogbu also identified gender-specific strategies among these students. Black boys in the study feared being seen as homosexual and presented themselves as class comedians or hyper masculine athletes while playing down their academic success. High achieving Black girls discussed cutting class and deliberately opting out of school opportunities that would highlight their academic achievement. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) conclude that although Black students desire to do well, they often refrain from achieving academically due to pressure from their peers. Those who do excel in classes and on tests often hide their success out of fear of being negatively labeled by their Black peers as ‘acting White’ and, therefore, being seen as lacking a Black racial identity.

Although much of their text focuses on Black student peers, Ogbu and colleagues assert that Black students have learned oppositional orientations to academic success from Black family members and their communities (Fordham 1988, 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Arguably, as a way to cope with racial discrimination, Blacks have developed a collective identity and community that is in opposition to that of Whites. The shared awareness of racial oppression and the presence of a collective identity established for Blacks a system of, what anthropologists have termed, fictive kinship (Shimkin et al. 1978; Williams 1981; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fordham 1988,1996). Fictive kinship is used to connect Black people into extended

family and community relationships despite a lack of formal relation by blood or marriage. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) assert that Blacks establish an extended family with their communities through a system of fictive kinship and then develop boundaries that maintain a set of attitudes and behaviors that determine what it means to be Black, particularly in opposition to what it means to be White. Black parents and community members teach Black children the meaning and importance of fictive kinship at an early age and their peers reinforce ideas stemming from fictive kinship throughout their school years. Without observation, Fordham and Ogbu report that Black children receive negative messages from their parents and communities about education and academic success, leading them to develop lower educational aspirations than their white peers. They posit that:

[T]he attitudes and behaviors which children learn [from the Black community] as they grow up and which they bring to school are those required by and appropriate for the niche Black Americans have traditionally occupied in the American corporate economy and racial stratification system (pg. 179).

Black people as a collective understand the barriers they face in society and have had to develop adaptive strategies to survive, such as a lack of investment in education, which they therefore pass on to their children. In school, Black peers further discourage each other from putting time and effort into academics by socially excluding those they feel are “acting White.” Accordingly, in order to close the academic achievement gap, Black students must distance themselves from their racial identity and their Black fictive kin, families, and communities.

METHODS

Because I am familiar with the setting and certain cultural practices, I acknowledge that some things I observed in the setting or heard during the interviews were perceived as normal. For example, the Program Director, Craig, would typically talk to me about raising his young boys or about how the children in the program were being raised by their parents. He would

often end his stories with “you know how *we* do,” referring to the parenting habits of Black people and I would usually affirm that I understood with a head nod or a smile without asking him to elaborate. However, given my awareness of my insider perspective, I made attempts to check my insider status throughout my time with the program by asking questions when my study participants assumed I understood what they were saying or their interpretations of their words and actions because we shared the same racial identity. For example, I prefaced each interview by letting the participants know that some questions I asked may seem obvious or redundant, however I wanted to make sure I accurately capture what they mean. Participants usually went into greater detail and tried to elaborate more often after hearing this. Writing analytical notes on my observations also allowed me to explore my personal biases and various reactions in the setting to further my analysis regarding my own interactions with the participants.

Observations. From January 2015 until December 2016, I conducted weekly observations of the youth program, with each observation lasting approximately two hours. I also observed parent meetings and undergraduate volunteer meetings and training sessions. In addition, I attended events put on by the program (art shows, community performances, and graduations) that showcased the cultural enrichment that students received for the duration of the academic year. During my 18 months of observations, I took hand written notes in small notebooks during each program session, meeting, and event when it was appropriate. When I could not take notes in the moment, I would find a quiet place immediately following my time in the space and record my observations from memory. After a day, I would review my notes and write notes-on-notes to expand on my initial thoughts and observations, making connections between different sets of notes and recognizing patterns.

Semi-structured Interviews. I was initially interested in understanding how Black parents used Bright Start as an extension of their involvement in public schools. I interviewed three parents of program participants and asked them questions about their experiences in the local public schools, their ideas about education, and their involvement with Bright Start. Despite the change in my research focus, these interviews remain pertinent. I have also conducted three separate interviews with the Program Director during each program semester concerning his ideas about education and goals for the youth program. The interviews lasted between one to two hours each. I recruited parent participants at a parent meeting given at the start of the 2015-2016 program year. I passed out recruitment fliers (see Appendix A) and spoke to the group of parents, introducing my interests in studying their experiences with their children's schools.

I met with two parents, Porsha and Karen, separately at the church that hosts the youth program and one parent, Trina, at the local public library. Interviews with the Director took place each time in a conference room located in his office building at the Black cultural center. I recorded each interview on my personal, password-protected laptop. Throughout each interview, I jotted down short notes and key words regarding participant tone and facial expressions. Immediately after each interview, I found a quiet space to take notes. I uploaded all interview transcripts unto my password-protected laptop using pseudonyms.

Data Analysis Strategies

Qualitative research projects are an interactive and inductive process that requires researchers to “work back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish [a] comprehensive set of themes” (Creswell 2007, p. 42). Charmaz (2014) further elaborates on the interactive process of data analysis and coding, insisting that “[we] interact with our participants and subsequently interact with them again many times over through studying their statements

and observed actions and re-envisioning the scenes in which we know them” (p. 115). To begin my analysis, I identified the general themes that were prevalent in the literature, “theory-generated codes” (Marshall and Rossman 2016, p. 218), surrounding race, culture, and education as an initial way of understanding the data (Glaser 1992). I then searched for emerging themes (Charmaz 2014) that presented themselves naturally in the data and were not addressed in the literature during the coding process, known as “in vivo codes” (Marshall and Rossman 2016, p. 218) and created themes that were relevant to my specific program site. I went back and forth between coding and creating themes in order to identify all relevant themes.

Lofland et al. (2006) describe memoing as “writing down your ideas about your various coding categories and their interconnections, and even about your procedures and fieldwork experiences” (p. 209). Since memos “are one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hand” (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 72), I used them throughout my analytic process. As I developed codes, I made theoretical and operational memos (Strauss and Corbin 1990) of my thought processes in creating the code and the ways in which I envisioned using them throughout my analysis. Through writing memos, I “try to identify and explore a general pattern or theme that cuts across a number of disparate incidents or events” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, p. 187).

STUDY SITE: BRIGHT START YOUTH PROGRAM

Well, this is *not* a homework helping or babysitting service. This is a cultural youth program... We provide a holistic learning opportunity to our scholars.

Mr. Craig, Program Director

Two Black undergraduate students at Southeast University located in the city of Pinegrove created Bright Start Youth Program in 1992. Following a 1990 task force report on the racial and economic disparities in the public schools of Pinegrove, Black community members called for a greater connection with Black undergraduate students at the university. Parents

hoped that the college students would be able to serve as academic role models to the Black youth in the predominantly white school district. Initially, Black undergraduate students met with elementary-aged children and their parents at a center in a predominantly Black neighborhood in the community on Saturday mornings. From 9 am until 4 pm, students attended informal classes on African culture, history, and art. As the popularity of the program grew, university students and parent volunteers from the community advocated for formal recognition and financial support from Southeast University. They believed that the university had a duty to better support the Black community in Pinegrove through increased resources and outreach.

Today, Bright Start is officially affiliated with the Black Cultural Center at Southeast University under the leadership of the Program Director, Mr. Craig. The stated purpose of Bright Start is “to educate, empower and expose participating community youth to various aspects of African, African-American and Latin culture and history, along with other cultural traditions through alternative teaching methods.” A young, charismatic Black man, Craig has brought more public attention and structure to the program during his three years working with Bright Start than any other Director has in the past. He has established formal liaisons with six public elementary schools in the district, where school counselors recommend potential program participants, referred to as ‘scholars’, to participate in Bright Start. He has also managed to hold yearly recruitment sessions for undergraduate student volunteers, known in the program as ‘leaders.’ During my observations, about thirty-five elementary students were enrolled in Bright Start. The majority of the children in the program self-identified as Black with only two students identified as mixed with both Black and White. About 69% of the families participating in Bright Start have a household income of less than \$25,000, putting them at or below the state poverty line.

Bright Start operates Monday through Thursday from 3:00pm until 5:30pm out of a community church located across from Southeast University campus. During a typical program day, students arrive and are split into three separate rooms in the church according to their grades. Kindergarten and first graders are assigned to the K-One Room, second and third graders to the Two-Three Room, and fourth and fifth graders to the Four-Five Room. Two or three undergraduate volunteers manage each group of children while Craig divides his time among the three rooms. Craig typically recruits 25 to 28 undergraduate volunteers each year with many of the students volunteering for two or three years at a time. The majority of the undergraduate volunteers are Black women with the exception of four men (two Black and two White), six White women, and one mixed (Asian and White) woman. Most of the volunteers expressed an interest in teaching- or childcare-related career paths and used the program as a “hands-on experience” with children.

For the first 30 minutes of Bright Start, the elementary students complete their homework assignments with the help of the undergraduate students and sometimes their peers. Afterwards, the students, along with the undergraduate volunteers, pull out books to read quietly for 20 minutes while eating snacks provided by the program. Students usually participate in the designated daily activity for the remainder of the program, including cooking lessons, dance practice (tap, ballet, hip hop, and bhangra), poetry and spoken word sessions, and step practice. At 5:30pm, undergraduate volunteers usher the students to the front steps of the church to await the arrival of their parents. The parents sign the children out and often use the time to talk with the volunteers, Craig, one another, and myself. Once all the children have been picked up, the volunteers circle up and debrief with Craig about the program day. They share any difficulties or triumphs they experienced that day or present suggestions about making the next day better.

Each Bright Start day ends with Craig and the volunteers putting their fists together while listening to encouraging words from one person in the circle before going their separate ways.

FINDINGS

The Pinegrove school district has a population of approximately 5400 elementary students with Black students making up about seven percent. Similar to districts around the country, Pinegrove has racial disparities between Black and White students in the public schools. During the fourth month of my program observations, a task force comprised of school board, university, and community members publicly released a report on the present achievement gap in the district. According to the report, racial disparities between White and Black students had increased within the past ten years. Gaps continued to exist on the end-of-the year math and reading assessments with only 30 percent of Black students passing compared to about 80 percent of White students. Additionally, Black students, particularly Black boys, were shown to be ten times as likely as White students to receive suspensions in the Pinegrove school district.

Parents of Bright Start participants were well aware of racial disparities in the school district and potential differential treatment of Black students in the predominantly White classrooms. Craig, the Bright Start Program Director, and the parents frequently discussed possible racial discrimination that Black children faced in school. In a meeting with the parents, Craig encouraged the parents to “pop in” on their children’s classrooms, especially if the teachers had informed them that their children had behavioral problems. Sitting in a circle with the parents, Craig urged the parents to be proactive in their schools and to question teachers:

There’s a significant gap in what teachers say they teach and what they actually teach... That’s why you have to go to [your] scholar’s class unannounced... If there’s some questionable things being said [by teachers], question them back! Report cards might not be a true reflection of what is happening in the classroom... I don’t think these schools put enough time and energy into *our* kids as they do others.

Speaking of White teachers neglecting Black students, Craig stressed that “they” sometimes did not put enough time and energy into “our” kids. The parents shook their heads up and down in agreement and appeared to automatically get the implication of his words. Craig asserted that report cards may not be accurate representations of the effort put forth by Black children in classrooms and seemed to be suggesting that the racial disparities between Black and White children were caused by a lack of adequate teaching skills and possible racial discrimination that Black students experience in school.

Some parents expressed elation with finding a local program that catered to Black students. Porsha, a single mother of two, informed me while she rubbed her fingers together as if to pinch and release a fine powder: “It’s like a sprinkle [of Black students in the schools].” Continuing to emphasize using her fingers, she laughed “And when I say a sprinkle, I mean a sprinkle! Like [my daughter’s] class. There’s only two Black people in her class!” Porsha enrolled her children in Bright Start to provide her children access to the resources the program provided as well as to expose them to knowledge about Black history and culture that they did not receive in their schools. Like many of the other parents involved in the program, Porsha attended the local schools in Pinegrove during times of school segregation. She juxtaposed her schooling experiences with that of her children to make a case as to why they attended a youth program for Black students:

When I was in school, you know, we had majority, you know, you could tell, you know, other people looked the same as you. You don’t have that in there. You just grabbing to find somebody that resembles you... Cause when I had with my son, he started kindergarten...I said "You ready to go to school?" He said "No, mommy I'm not." I said "Well, well why not?" And he said "Mommy, cause I'm, I'm brown and she's white!" Cause he had, I mean when he was in Pre-K, all he had was Black teachers. So when he went to public school, he was like "Wait a minute! This aint what I'm used to!" I mean, they had them in there, but they were not in an authoritative role like his teacher...Like I said, you had people that you

know you can relate to. You go to a school and you don't have nobody to relate to, it's kind of hard for you to function in the classroom or even want to be there.

Representation appears to be important for Porsha and her children. Porsha compares her experience in a segregated school for Black children with that of her son in a post-desegregation, predominantly white school. She believes that seeing Blacks in positions of power in schools would help her children be more comfortable and academically successful. Porsha alludes to a lack of diversity in school personnel as a cause of the continued presence of the achievement gap. Bright Start for her is a way for her children to identify racially with authority figures and peers in an educational setting. Porsha, like other parents, saw Bright Start as a place where their children could receive positive affirmations concerning their Black racial identity. As a mother of two young boys expressed during a meeting for parents, "It's something about this program...Like [my son] knows he's a little Black boy and it's different."

Craig and Bright Start volunteers used language in the program to challenge negative stereotypes about Black children that were presumed to be prevalent in society. By referring to the elementary students as 'scholars,' Bright Start attempted to boost academic confidence and the self-esteem of the Black children participating in the program. During an interview, Craig further explained the intention behind using the term 'scholar':

You know, I think the more you put a label of yourself, the more you become a part of that particular label. If you walk around and, you know, calling kids stupid all the time, they are gonna feel like they're stupid or they're dumb. Or if you place them in groups with slow kids or whatever, I mean they are going to feel like they are slow. But if you call them scholars, that starts to stick! They will think, you know, I am a scholar! What is a scholar? You know? And then they learn the definition of scholar and their like oh yeah, that's me!

Many of the students in Bright Start have been labeled as problem students or diagnosed with learning disabilities, such as Porsha's daughter Lexi. Craig alludes to the differential treatment that Black students may receive in school by teachers and other school personnel and uses labels

that counter or refute ideas about Black students being intellectually inferior. Craig and the undergraduate volunteers were consistent with referring to the elementary students as ‘scholars’ at all times. Even in orientations and meetings with just the undergraduate volunteers and none of the children and parents present, Mr. Craig used the term scholar to refer to the children. Program activities also attempted to combat negative stereotypes that Black children may encounter in their schools and classrooms. To prepare for the end-of-the-year graduation ceremony, Craig had the children take photos outside in the church garden, holding signs with positive affirmations about themselves. Some of the signs included labels such as “aspiring,” “intelligent,” and “peaceful,” implying that others typically do not view Black children in this way.

Bright Start was stabled in order to teach participants about Black culture and history. The program also provided participants with a space to comfortably express blackness and their unique life experiences as Black children. Books purposely provided the program participants at Bright Start with positive representations of Black children. During times for silent reading, the children would often read books centered around Black characters such as *You Can Do It* by Tony Dungy and *Brother’s of the Knight* by Debbie Allen. While lying on the floor, huddled around a copy of *Brother’s of the Knight*, Isaiah, Ezkiel, and Drew closely examined the pictures of the Black boys in the book. “He looks like me. I’m him! And that’s my older brother right there,” Isaiah excitedly informed his friends. Ezkiel and Drew also found characters that they physically identified with before the group of boys flipped back to the front of the book and started to read it again.

The children also received validation for their interests and experiences that were potentially unique to Black people. Craig and Andy, a Black male who had been a volunteer at

Bright Start throughout his entire four years at Southeast University, would often discuss sneakers with the elementary boys in the program. Although the topic of Black males and sneakers has been heavily critiqued, shoes remain a popular and socially important item among Black boys and men. Craig's daily shoe choice was a hot topic among the Black boys in the program and allowed him to connect with the children while also validating and normalizing their interests in sneakers. Andy joked with Craig about his new orange sneakers one day while helping the children in the Four-Five room with their homework. The Black boys in the room were especially excited to also be included in the conversation:

[Craig] stepped back from Andy and held his arms out wide. "Do I have on high-waters today?" he asked with a laugh. "Nah. You good today. You was drowning last week, but you saved yourself. Them shoes are nice too!" Craig put his foot on a chair next to Andy for him to examine his bright orange sneakers closer. "WHEW! Those are hot! I see you!" We all laughed as Andy praised Craig and Craig put his foot back on the floor and brushed pretend dirt off his shirt and pants, indicating that he knew he looked nice... "I like your shoes," Jordan, a fifth grader, told [Craig] in a shy, soft voice. "Thanks Jordan man!" Craig gave him a fist bump and sat down next to him to tie one of his shoelaces. "Mr. Andy said he liked them too. But I like YOUR shoes man!" The boys at the table all got up out of their seats to look at Jordan's sneakers and started looking at each other's shoes and complimenting one another. Drew, another fifth grader in the Four-Five room, stood up from his seat next to me and leaned over the table to look at Craig's shoes. "They're okay, but I've seen you wear better," he joked and sat down with a shrug of his shoulder. Craig stood up and walked towards Drew as the other children in the room giggled. "Oh really Drew? It's like that?" (Field notes, October 10, 2016, Four-Five room)

Conversations about Black hair also demonstrate a focus on blackness and the unique experiences of Black children that the children may not discuss in public school settings. While walking back from a trip to the water fountain, Melissa and Sunny, two girls from the K-One room, were talking with Tay, a kindergartener, about her new braids:

"My mom said I can't wear weave until I'm sixteen," Sunny said as she carefully gathered up a handful of Tay's braids and let them fall through her fingers. "It's not *really* weave. It's just braids," Tay responded as she slowly walked in front of the girls so that Sunny could continue to play in her hair. "My mama said weave

is too grown for me,” Melissa chimed in as she also started to touch a few braids. “Haven’t y’all heard that it’s bad to have more than one person in your hair at a time?” Jess, a K-One volunteer softly scolded the girls with her hands on her hips. “They say it’ll make your hair fall out!” Tay screamed playfully, grabbed her head and ran into the room while Jess chuckled and shook her head from side-to-side. (Field notes, September 24, 2015)

Craig and other Black volunteers frequently joined in on conversations about Black hair, at times relaying their own personal experiences to relate to the children:

As we worked on the review sheet, Dara took her hair out of her ponytail holder and shook her head to let her hair fall over her shoulders. Craig, who had been helping Andrew with his worksheet at the same table, started to chuckle at her. “I see you got your hair done Dara! What? Your momma used a hot comb?” Jada laughed and commented “She don’t know nothin’ about that!” “Yes I do!” Dara exclaimed. “I went to the hairdresser to get it straightened for pictures, but my mommy uses a hot comb sometimes!” “Did she burn you?” Craig asked, still chuckling. “I used to HATE the hot comb. You always got burned–,” Jada started to say but was interrupted by Mercedes “Right here!” Mercedes touched the top of her ears and we all started to laugh when Jada loudly agreed while throwing her hands up in the air “Yeah man!”

“My mom burned me one time right back here,” Dara lifted up her hair with one arm and massaged the back of her neck. “She had to get that kitchen!” Craig said and we all laughed. “After she burned me, I screamed and she said ‘Girl, you better get in that kitchen and get the butter!’” “I didn’t know people still used hotcombs,” I commented while laughing along. “My big sister bought one off Amazon over the summer,” Mercedes told me as she leaned on the table. (Field notes, October 10, 2016, Four-Five room)

Hair discussions were not limited to girls in the program. On the first day of students returning to Bright Start for the new year, Jason and Dee, two brothers who had been in the program for multiple years, arrived with new hairstyles. They both had let their afros grow at the top of their heads with the sides shaved low. The top of their heads were dyed a light, golden brown, contrasting with their naturally black hair. As they walked into the Four-Five room, Craig and the volunteers started to praise their new look. “Looking good Jay and Dee!” Craig shouted as he gave the boys one-armed hugs. “I see you with the Odell Beckham!” Andy said, referencing a popular Black football player as he rubbed their heads affectionately. As we all walked into the

church, the Black women volunteers continued the discussion on hair, complementing the box braids one volunteer wore and the locs that two other volunteers wore.

In the predominantly white school district of Pinegrove, Bright Start serves as a potential counterspace for Black parents and their children. Counterspaces function as settings that challenge dominant deficit-narratives concerning marginalized groups and identities in society (Case and Hunter 2012). They attempt to enhance the psychological wellbeing of marginalized individuals who experience oppression in other settings (Nunez 2011; Case and Hunter 2012, 2014; Terry et al. 2014). Parents of Bright Start participants perceive predominantly white public schools and classroom environments to be potentially harmful to Black students. Craig and the volunteers therefore attempt to center Blackness and normalize the experience of Black children in the Bright Start youth program. Activities highlighted Blackness, such as the use of Black readers and the children's books portraying Black characters for the elementary participants to identify with. Language and labels were also used by Craig and the program volunteers to challenge negative stereotypes about Black children. Bright Start participants engaged in conversations with Craig and Black volunteers about aspects of Black culture, such as discussions on Black hair and sneakers. Informal discussions about Black culture provided the children with positive affirmations of their Black racial identity in ways that perhaps were not given in their predominantly white schools.

Perpetuating Ideas of Oppositional Culture

Although Bright Start was assumed to be a program for Black children to escape from the potentially negative racial stereotypes and racial discrimination that they might experience in school and classroom settings, negative stereotypes about Black children and Black people, stemming from ideas of oppositional culture, persisted in the program. Oppositional culture

theory asserts that Black students do not put in the necessary time and effort to succeed in school (Fordham 1988, 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Black students are thought to develop orientations that are in opposition to school and academic success from their peers, families, and community. Black families and communities attribute school success to Whites and in direct opposition to a collective Black identity. They therefore do not place a high value in education for Black people and translate this lack of value to their children (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fordham 1988, 1991; Ogbu 2003, 2008). Craig and Bright Start volunteers unconsciously perpetuated ideas of oppositional culture. They were at times skeptical of children's orientations to school and education, stereotyped Black parents as uninterested in and potentially harmful to the academic success of the children, and they maintained gendered notions of racial stereotypes through program activities.

Unintentional Counterspace to Home

When asked to introduce themselves during the start of volunteer orientation, many of the undergraduate volunteers expressed an interest in helping children who are less fortunate than they were: “[This program] is a really good way to give back to kids who may not have the opportunities that I’ve had.” “I’m here to help them realize and reach their full potential.” “I’m interested in teaching kids that end up being Craig.” (fieldnotes, September 9th, 2016, Volunteer Orientation). Craig frequently discussed his own background growing up in poverty-stricken home with a single-father who was addicted to drugs. Craig used athletics to escape his home environment and went off to college at a local historically Black state university where he became interested in academics. He frequently discussed the hardships he faced as a child, from not meeting his mother until he was an adult, to the dangers he faced everyday walking to and from

the bus stop for school in gang territory. Using his own personal narrative, he conveyed to the volunteers that he related to the children because they were living in similar environments.

During the second day of orientation for the undergraduate volunteers, Craig brought in a college professor from his alma mater as a guest speaker. The professor, a tall, slim Black man with long dread locs and a kente-patterned bracelet, talked to the volunteers about the class demographic of the elementary students in the program. He talked about his childhood growing up in poverty and his experience working with Black youth as a high school teacher. The problem students that the professor had encountered and discussed with the Bright Start volunteers were all Black boys. Craig again talked about his experiences growing up in a single-parent, low-income household with a father who was addicted to drugs. He explained that his professor had made a significant impact on him, encouraging him to pursue a graduate education and serving as an inspiration for the work Craig did with Bright Start. After hearing Craig's story, a few of the Black undergraduate volunteers also shared their own personal stories about growing up in poverty and making it to the university as a student. Throughout the orientation, the image of the poor Black child in a single-parent household with drug-addicted family members and a lack of connection with school and education was used to describe the situations of Bright Start program participants. Although some of the children enrolled in Bright Start fit some of the descriptions, no other narratives about the children were offered. His narrative became the frame for all the children and families participating in Bright Start.

Stereotypes about Black parents and the home environment of the children were used as a tool by Craig to increase the level of commitment from the undergraduate volunteers. “Our scholars need us...And our parents need us too. They really do,” Craig informed the volunteers at a monthly meeting. Volunteers were placed in a position of power and authority over the children and their parents to feel as though they were better able to assist the families they served: “Some parents leave it up to the school. Some parents might leave it up to you!...You could be the only person in this kid’s life that has shown them that level of consistent compassion” (fieldnotes, September 12, 2015, Volunteer Orientation). Volunteers were seen as saviors for the children from not only school, but also their home lives. Volunteers were presented as more competent and caring than both teachers and parents, justifying their crucial role in the lives of Bright Start participants. Black parents of Bright Start participants were portrayed as uninterested in the education and academic success of their children.

Ideas about the home environments of the children participating in Bright Start could possibly be influenced by potential funding sources, the majority of which are wealthy, white donors. To appeal to potential funders, such as the Southeast Parent’s Counsel Grant, the program has to push the narrative of the deficit Black family who is in need of money and resources that they would not survive without. When discussing an upcoming presentation for potential program funders, Craig explained to me that he and the volunteers had “seven minutes to tell them why they should fund this program for Black students.” Craig seems to believe that the Bright Start participants have to fit into the white imagination of Black children and Black families in order to receive the resources necessary to keep the program in operation. Not only

was Bright Start portrayed as a counterspace to the predominantly white school district, the program was also depicted as a counterspace to the disadvantaged homes of Black children.

Lack of Trust in Black Children

During a meeting held to update the parents on program activities and changes, Craig opened up the floor for questions, comments, and suggestions. “Between work and my other children, I don’t have time to help with homework, read books, and still spend quality time with him at home,” Diane, a single mother commented. “Maybe if you could read with him more here so that I don’t have to, it would help me.” Parents frequently made this particular suggestion to Craig and the undergraduate volunteers. They successfully pushed for homework time to be increased so that students were able to finish their work during the program hours and have time with their families once they arrived home. At the last observed undergraduate volunteer orientation in September of 2016, Craig announced that not only had Bright Start “extended homework and reading times” by 30 minutes, the program had also recruited Black undergraduate tutors that would work with some elementary students separately for an hour to “significantly improve [their] reading and comprehension skills.”

It is assumed that the activities and resources that Bright Start provides to the program participants are assisting in closing achievement gaps. At the end-of-the-year Art Showcase, Craig stood before an audience consisting of parents, schoolteachers, administrators, Pinegrove school board members, and program funders and explained the significance of the art performances the children put on throughout the night. “Our scholars gain confidence [when they] perform these things. It increases their vocabulary skills and helps us to level the playing field,” he relayed as the crowd clapped and some exclaimed “that’s right!” Throughout the night, Craig would reiterate how the children in the program were improving academically since they

began participating in Bright start. He announced that many of the children had “improved in one or more subject areas” during the year. “These scholars are accomplishing things [in school] and will continue to accomplish them,” Craig asserted to the audience. Although no official measurements were taken to demonstrate the impact of Bright Start on the academics of the children, no one in attendance openly refuted his assessment of the program.

Craig and the Bright Start volunteers were aware of the racial stereotypes that school personnel had about Black children, however they did not appear to notice when they themselves used those same ideas to shape their interactions with the children in the program. Craig continuously encouraged the volunteers to make sure that the children did not “trick” them by saying they had no homework. “Ask to see their folders,” Craig instructed at volunteers at group meetings, referencing folders that teachers often sent home with elementary school students for parents to look over. Student folders consisted of homework and reading assignments and important information about upcoming school events. Many of them also had letters written to parents about child conduct and behavior for the day. However, children sometimes complained about the homework searches. When Sam, a volunteer in the Two-Three room, looked through the folder of Isaiah, a third grader in the program, she started to read a note from Isaiah’s teacher:

“That’s for my momma, man!” Isaiah stated angrily as he sat down with a huff in his chair and crossed his arms. Sam put the note back in his folder and made a comment about Isaiah having a “bad day” in school because his marker had been moved from green to yellow. “You wouldn’t want to get into more trouble by lying about having homework,” she told him as she sat his folder back in front of him and moved on to check the folders of other students. Isaiah pushed his folder away and continued to sit with a frown on his face and his arms crossed during the remainder of homework time. (Field notes, February 3, 2016, Two-Three room)

Volunteers did not trust the children when they stated that they did not have homework, even when other children from the same school corroborated their claims. After a day of school-wide

testing, many of the children in the Four-Five room did not have homework. The volunteers in the room kept insisting to see folders as the children repeated “We had a test today!” Some of the children had not brought a folder with them because they spent most of the day taking End of the Grade tests. After about five minutes going back and forth, Craig walked in and informed the volunteers that the children did not have homework and could instead play games during homework time. Craig eventually started to bring packets for the children to work on when they did not have homework. He stressed in an email to the volunteers that the ten page packets would be presented to “any scholar that ‘claims’ to not have homework.” Children participating in Bright Start were assumed to use dubious tactics to not complete their homework and reading assignments for school. Although Craig and the volunteers insisted on numerous occasions that Bright Start was “not an extension of school,” the lack of trust in the students can be seen as similar behavior to that of white teachers.

Gendered Notions of Oppositional Culture

Much of the literature on racial interactions in schools focus on the effects of implicit biases, racial discrimination, and school discipline policies have on the academic success or failure of Black boys. Recent studies have begun to explore the ways in which the education of Black girls is also impacted by school policies and practices in manners that are in some ways similar to Black boys and in others unique to Black girls (Morris 2007; Blake et al. 2011; Morris 2016). The emphasis on the schooling experiences of and educational policies for Black boys has created an urgent need to save Black boys while simultaneously rendering the racial discrimination Black girls experience in school virtually invisible. Although Black girls made up approximately half of the program participants, Bright Start centered the experiences, problems, and needs of Black boys in ways that were similar to school practices.

When describing a new Thursday reading initiative, where guest readers would be coming to Bright Start and reading aloud to the different rooms of students, Craig informed me that Southeast University football players would be participating as readers. “I just think it’ll be good for the kids, especially the boys, to see someone like them who likes to read. A lot of them want to grow up and play sports,” he said. He jokingly added, “I just hope they can read!” On the Thursday that the players arrived, they read books to the children that focused on Black characters and Black historical events. The books included selections such as *Little Bill*, a children’s book series developed by Bill Cosby, *My Brother Martin*, about the life of Martin Luther King Jr., and *Sit-In* a picture book that recounted the Greensboro lunch counter sit-in of four Black college students. The children seemed more interested in the football players than the content of the books. Many of the children in the Two-Three room interrupted the players to ask questions about football. “What position do you play?” “Have you ever scored a touchdown?” “When did you start playing football?” A few of the girls sat together, whispering and giggling throughout the reading time. As the football players were leaving the church, Mariah, a tiny, soft-spoken third grader tugged on my sweater and whispered, “Can I tell you a secret? I’m going to marry a football player!” Craig and the volunteers were visibly disappointed with the reactions from the students, mainly the girls:

After the children left for the day, the volunteers debriefed with Craig where they discussed the Thursday reading activity. “We need to make sure we talk with them about keeping focused on the books,” Craig suggested to the volunteers. “Yeah, because did you hear those girls? They were being so fast!” Charlotte declared to the group. The other volunteers, all of whom were Black women, agreed with a nod of their heads and started to give accounts of the behaviors of the girls in the rooms they volunteered in. Craig frowned and shook his head from side-to-side. “That’s not what they are here for,” he sighed. (Field notes, January 22, 2015)

All of the books about Black people that I saw being read centered on Black boys or men, highlighting the priority of targeting Black boys in the program. Black boys were seen as needing more motivation to develop an interest in education and reading as compared to Black girls. Black girls were expected to identify with Black male characters in the books and also the Black male readers who visited the program. Although there were more Black women volunteers involved in Bright Start, no educational initiatives or activities were created that centered Black girls. It is important to note that Black male volunteers were also not used to attempt to motivate Black boys in the program to read more. The stereotypical Black athlete was instead used to identify with the children, furthering the idea that sports would be the key to success and upward mobility for the Black boys.

Although Craig expressed concern with White school personnel labeling Black students as behavior problems in schools, he and the volunteers also communicated to the children in the program that they had behavior issues. A few weeks before the end-of-program art showcase, Craig invited me to watch the older boys practice their step performance. As I sat waiting for the boys to get in their proper formation, Craig walked around fixing each boy's form. They proceeded to show me their routine. Craig stood talking next to me as we observed their steps and explained that Black boys were in need of more discipline:

They really benefit from this... It's not just about stepping. It's about confidence and a chance to have a performance... I have really challenged them with this. See, people like to placate kids, especially boys, but I think you have to be hard on them and challenge them. (Field notes, April 5, 2015, Step practice for boys)

I did not observe any of the boys misbehaving in ways that were dangerous or problematic, however Craig seemed to believe that the Black boys in the program were behaving because they were being "challenged." He often talked about "catching" many of the boys before they grew up

and engaged in bad behavior, such as participating in gang activity or becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol. Stepping served as a way to teach the boys discipline and respect for authority. During practice sessions, the boys were not allowed to play around, move out of place, or talk to one another. Black boys in Bright Start were seen as more prone to misbehave, causing Craig and the volunteers to pay closer attention to their actions and behaviors. In response to the potential racial discrimination Black boys experience through school disciplinary practices, Bright Start attempted to use stepping as a way to teach boys in the program how to exhibit behaviors deemed respectable. A lack of movement and voice was encouraged to show that the boys were attentive and obedient to authority. Craig himself is involved in a Black Greek fraternity that he consistently referenced and credited with teaching him “confidence and discipline.”

Black girls also participated in stepping activities and performances, however their practices were not frequent or as structured as that of the boys. Instead of using stepping as a tool to create discipline in the girls as he did with the boys, Craig often described the activity as “exercising and having fun.” After each step practice, the girls would sit in a circle and talk about their day in school. They would also use the circle time to ask the members of the Black sorority who were present about their experience in college. Craig once commented, “I wish the boys could do that. But they need to focus on shaping up!” Girls in the program were not allowed to be present during the step practices for boys although the boys could watch the girls. When Craig invited me to watch the boys’ step routine, he sent the girls in the Four-Five room to the Two-Three room to pass out extra snacks to the rest of the children. Some of the girls complained that the boys had seen their routine the day before, but Craig was adamant that the

boys “need to focus.” Black girls were seen here as a distraction to boys and a possible disruption to the development of boys.

The girls in the program noticed the gender differences when it came to the step practices and performances. Craig and his fraternity brothers pooled money together to buy the boys in the program new sneakers to wear during their step performances. The girls who stepped were given light pink socks. As they asked Craig about the different treatment the boys received, he let them know that the boy steppers deserved new shoes because of the effort they were putting in:

After showing Craig their progress during a step practice for the girls, Kyla, the only fifth grade girl in Bright Start, ran up to Craig. She pulled on his hand and asked “Are you going to buy us shoes again? Or too, like the boys?” “Yeah, we only got socks!” another girl declared as they surrounded Craig. The other girls agreed and waited for Craig to answer. “I look for effort,” Craig told the girls when they quieted down. “Even if you don’t get the step, if you give effort then there might be a treat at the end of the tunnel. And not a train.” He chuckled at his own joke. The girls started to cheer and jump up and down at the possibility of getting new shoes. (Fieldnotes, citation needed)

Craig informs the girls that he “look[s] for effort,” seeming to imply that the girls were not putting in as much effort as the boys were during their step practice. He brushes their concerns off as a joke and successfully distracts the girls with the promise of shoes if he feels as though they were giving serious effort to the activity in the future. Shoes are used here as a form of validation and acknowledgement of achievement for the boys whereas the girls receive socks which are less expensive, placing a higher significance and value on the boys’ participation in the stepping activity as compared to the girls. In contrast with Black girls, Black boys were seen as particularly vulnerable to peer pressure, misbehavior, and academic failure. Therefore, Bright Start program activities centered the experiences and perceived needs of Black boys.

CONCLUSION

Racial disparities in education between Black and White students continue to be a major concern. Compared to White students, Black students are less proficient in core subjects in school, have lower scores on national assessments, and are less likely to complete high school. The most widespread explanation for the cause of the achievement gap posits that Black students develop attitudes and orientations that are in opposition to academic success. Black students are thought to have learned this oppositional culture to schooling from their parents and community. As President Barack Obama announced in 2009 to introduce the educational plans of his administration: “It’s going to have to be a sustained effort, including a change in the attitudes about educations within our own [Black] communities.” It is assumed that Black people do not value education and see academic success as “acting White”, causing Black children to disengage from school. Drawing on 18 months of participant observations and supplemental interviews, this study explores ideas about oppositional culture and academic success in a community program which serves Black children. Parents of program participants and Bright Start staff and volunteers were aware of the negative stereotypes and racial discrimination that Black children experience in predominantly white schools and classrooms. Instead of promoting attitudes and orientations that possibly hinder the academic success of Black children, Black parents enrolled their children in Bright Start community youth program to try to combat racial disparities in education. I found that Bright Start functioned as a counterspace for Black children, attempting to challenge the perceived dominant narrative of oppositional culture present in the Pine grove school district. The elementary-aged participants were referred to as scholars to contradict ideas that Black

children are not invested or engaged in school and academic success. The use of the elite term of scholar not only signals that Black children are academically capable, but also relays that Black children are highly intellectual and producers of knowledge.

Program structure, activities, and informal conversations were used promote academic success while also normalizing Black culture and affirming the unique experiences of Black children and people. Parents of participants successfully advocated for more time to be allotted for homework assistance and reading during program hours to increase reading comprehension and ensure their children were completing their work for school. During my first few months of observations, homework and reading time were combined in the first 30 minutes of the program day. By the last few months of my fieldwork, homework and reading time had been separated and extended, with 35 minutes being allotted to homework assistance and 25 minutes for independent or group reading. As shown in the findings, all books used in the program portrayed Black characters for the children to racially identify with in order to promote a love of reading as the children experience Black representation in the books. Participation in Bright Start challenges widely held ideas that Black parents and the Black community are not invested in the education of Black children. I found that parents and program staff and volunteers not only attempted to increase reading comprehension for children, but also made an effort to link academic success to Black culture. Findings from this study suggest that attitudes and orientations that may hinder academic achievement for Black students may not come from the Black community. Historically, Black communities have always been invested in providing an education for Black people despite the barriers faced. Bright Start

continues that tradition by offering Black children a place to enhance their academic skills in a more familiar setting that centers Blackness.

While functioning as a counterspace to the predominantly white public school, Bright Start unintentionally served as a counterspace to the home environments of the children. Following the rationale of oppositional culture, Black parents were portrayed as uninvolved in, and at times detrimental to, the education and academic success of their children. Craig, the Program Director, frequently used his personal narrative of growing up in a low-income, single-parent home to characterize the home environment of the program participants. Racial stereotypes of the home life of the children were possibly used by Craig to encourage the undergraduate volunteers to be dependable and remain active with the program and the children. Craig also discussed the funding presentations he had to often give to organizations that were composed of predominantly wealthy White potential donors. Depicting program participants as poor, Black children and families in dire need of resources to succeed may have increased the likelihood that Bright Start would receive the funding needed to keep the program running.

Although Bright Start served as a counterspace for Black children from the predominantly white public schools and classrooms they attended, the program continued to perpetuate ideas of oppositional culture. Fordham and Ogbu asserted that Black students are academically capable but purposely do not strive for academic success for fear of being bullied and ostracized by other Black students, contributing to the persistence of racial disparities in education (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fordham 1996; Ogbu 2003, 2008). Craig and the volunteers lacked trust in the students when they were told they did not have homework. They frequently worried that the children in the

program were trying to avoid completing work or readings. Data did not reveal whether this lack of trust in students was due to their racial identity and stereotypes attached to Black children or if adults are skeptical of all children when it comes to schoolwork. However, as Black children continuously experience racial prejudice and racial discrimination in school settings, incidents of distrust, as seen in the program, may be interpreted as racial microaggressions that can be psychologically harmful.

Gender differences have not been extensively studied in research pertaining to oppositional culture. Findings from this study show that Black boys are thought of as particularly susceptible to disengaging from school to become involved in risky, and possibly criminal, behavior. Therefore, the perceived needs of Black boys were centered in Bright Start program activities. Books for the children featured a majority of Black male characters and Black male athletes were used to motivate Black boys to think of reading as cool. Stepping was used as a tool to instill discipline and obedience to authority into the boys in the program and shoes were used as a reward for their compliance. In contrast, Black girls in the program participated in step practices as a form of exercise and entertainment.

With public concern over the mass incarceration of Black men and boys (Western and Wilderman 2009; Alexander 2012; Pettit 2012; Hinton 2016) along with the deaths of Black boys by police officers and White vigilantes, such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, it is easy to understand the increased interest in protecting Black boys from the harmful and life threatening affects of racism, racial prejudice and racial discrimination. Compared to White women and girls, Black women and girls are also experiencing higher incarceration rates and deaths at the hands of police officers,

however, not at higher rates than Black men and boys. Black women and girls have also received less media coverage and less focus in the literature on discrimination in school discipline practices and participation in the criminal justice system. Although Craig appears to be aware of racism and racial discrimination, he believes that self-discipline and obedience to authority figures are the solution for Black boys. This belief has caused the program to neglect the unique needs of Black girls who participate in Bright Start while at the same time over-policing the behaviors and actions of Black boys. Findings suggest that community programs for Black children may offer participants a counterspace to predominantly white public schools and classrooms. At the same time, these programs are not void of racial stereotypes and ideas of oppositional culture. Beliefs in the cultural deficiency of Black culture are held alongside understandings of racial barriers to education. Preconceived notions about Black children stemming from racism continue to permeate educational settings, even those formed within Black communities. Ideas of oppositional culture may not come solely from Black parents and community members, instead, they may be a function of the larger structure of and conditions in society.

Limitations and Future Directions

The potential role that Black communities have in shaping the attitudes and orientations that Black children have towards education has not been a focus of research on oppositional culture. This study examined a community organization that catered to Black elementary-aged children in order to understand how racial disparities in education were being addressed. As Black community organizations and members who do not participate in the program are not explored, the extent to which Bright Start is an

appropriate representation of the Black community in the Pinegrove area cannot be measured and therefore serves as one limitation to this study. Future interviews with Pinegrove community members at other organizations focused on Black youth may provide greater insight into the process by which Black community members develop ideas of oppositional culture while they understand racism and racial discrimination at the same time.

Contradictions between ideology and action in this study demonstrates the complexity of counterspaces for marginalized groups. More research is needed to theoretically enhance the use of a counterspace framework in order to further investigate programs and spaces dedicated to challenging dominant narratives and stereotypes that are potentially harmful to Black children and other marginalized groups. Case and Hunter (2012) have laid the groundwork for using the concept of a counterspace to investigate the process by which specific settings promote the psychological wellbeing of participants. However, my research reveals that ideas of patriarchy and white supremacy persist in spaces that challenge dominant narratives and racial stereotypes, suggesting that counterspaces may unintentionally mirror the same institutions they attempt to contrast. Thus future research should analyze the ways in which structural conditions in society affect counterspaces and influence interactions within such spaces.

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