INVESTIGATING AN ASSET-BASED LITERACY AND LEADERSHIP AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM FOR MINORITIZED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

HE LEN CHUNG, SARAH RICHER, MANSI BHARGAVA, BRANDON HOANG & DANIEL INWOOD

• He Len Chung, PhD: The College of New Jersey; Psychology Department; PO Box 7728; Ewing, NJ; USA. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4013-2783.

• Sarah Richter, BA: The College of New Jersey; Psychology Department; PO Box 7728; Ewing, NJ; USA.

• Mansi Bhargava, BA: The College of New Jersey; Psychology Department; PO Box 7728; Ewing, NJ; USA. ORCID ID: 0009-0007-3227-2528.

• Brandon Hoang, BA: The College of New Jersey; Psychology Department; PO Box 7728; Ewing, NJ; USA. ORCID ID: 0009-0009-7831-023X.

• Daniel Inwood, BA: The College of New Jersey; Psychology Department; PO Box 7728; Ewing, NJ; USA. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9982-6336.

Conflicts of interest/Competing interests

All authors certify that they have no conflicts of interest or competing interests. Specifically, authors have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data availability: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by He Len Chung, Sarah Richter, Mansi Bhargava, and Brandon Hoang. The first draft of the manuscript was written by He Len Chung and Sarah Richter and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

APA ethical guidelines were followed throughout the project. All research procedures were approved by The College of New Jersey IRB (Protocol 2020-0335).

ABSTRACT

The current study used a qualitative research approach to investigate a reading-intensive afterschool program in a high-burden neighborhood that has experienced disproportionate levels of stress, violence, and trauma. Consistent with an asset-based framework, the program viewed students' identities and experiences as strengths to propel academic achievement and the development of agentic learners. Qualitative one-on-one interviews were conducted with ten high school-aged Black and Hispanic youth who participated in the program during the 2020-2021 academic year. Participants reflected on how the program promoted positive youth development by emphasizing relationship-building, developing a culture of connectedness, and helping them prepare for the future. The program also established literacy as a social practice where the surrounding context appeared to shape academic and social-emotional outcomes. Results suggest that out-of-school time organizations are in a unique position to support adolescent identity development. The implications of study findings are discussed in terms of the role that afterschool programming can play in centering culture and identity for Black and Hispanic youth.

Keywords: youth development, afterschool program, Out-of-School-Time program, asset-based pedagogy, literacy program, urban education, high school leaders

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sociocultural perspectives to pedagogy challenge deficit labels like "struggling student" by emphasizing how contexts (e.g., schools, afterschool programs, neighborhoods) contribute to achievement and developmental outcomes for individual students (Seeger, Parsons, & View, 2022). Out-of-School Time (OST) activities promote positive youth development, especially in terms of working with others, making responsible decisions, and understanding one's place in the world (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). In this way, OST programming can play a critical role in identity formation for youth, ultimately impacting academic, social, and other developmental outcomes. Access to various roles, activities, and behaviors during adolescence can help youth establish a sense of self, understand how they fit into society, and develop a sense of direction in life. Indeed, developmental psychologists have linked the development of industry, competency, identity, and autonomy during adolescence with intrinsic motivation, academic engagement, and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2009).

Access to high-quality afterschool activities and mentors is particularly important in high-poverty, under-resourced neighborhoods where youth report having few extracurricular options outside of school (Fredricks, & Simpkins, 2012; Mahoney et al., 2009) and higher exposure to violence and social toxins linked to negative developmental trajectories (Garbarino, 2022). For example, 50%–96% of urban youth have witnessed or experienced some form of violence in their community, with gang-related violence often described as an intractable problem that threatens safety and psychological health across multiple levels of functioning (Seal et al., 2014). Youth also express fear and frustration about physical and social disinvestment in their communities, evidenced by having fewer activities and resources than peers in neighboring more affluent communities, as well as spaces and buildings that look and feel abandoned (Capital City Youth Violence Coalition, 2019). Reports highlight young people's desire to access safe spaces that build resources (e.g., social capital, supportive relationships) and assets (e.g., individual skills) to support positive youth development and buffer potentially adverse

effects associated with community-level disadvantage (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Fredricks, & Simpkins, 2012; O'Donnell, & Kirkner, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2015).

1.1 Asset-Based Pedagogy, Learning, and Adolescent Identity Development

Asset- or strength-based pedagogical frameworks are rooted in sociocultural perspectives which assert that learning is a social enterprise – students learn by engaging with content, as well as the surrounding environment (e.g., classroom, school, home, Vygotsky, 1978). The frameworks centralize the experience of students and view their identities as strengths to propel academic achievement (Sciurba, 2014). The surrounding context – including factors like native language, socioeconomic status, cultural beliefs, and instructional method –manifests in adult messages about education, teacher expectations, and peer-to-peer conversations about learning (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Francois, 2021; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1995). As such, the context shapes one's purposes for learning beyond achievement outcomes and enables students to understand how their realities and academic work intersect with the world.

Asset-based pedagogy can have a significant impact on learning and identity development in contexts that have disenfranchised Black and Latinx students by failing to normalize achievement among students of color (Perry, 2003). Particularly in high-poverty communities, traditional school curricula leave students little room to interrogate inequality and reflect on marginalizing experiences like racism, discrimination, community violence, and historical trauma (Ginwright, 2015; Lee, 2003; Perry, 2003). All the while, students have to cope with various forms of individual and collective adversity, which can have deleterious effects on their health and well-being regardless of whether it is experienced directly or indirectly (Davidson et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2020). Over time, the accumulation of individual- and community-level stressors can contribute to low expectations for success (Yosso et al., 2009).

Learning contexts can disrupt disenfranchising experiences when adults convey high expectations and support youth with relational, relevant teaching. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), for example, describes practices that respond to and align student social, learning, and development needs (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). CRP highlights instructional methods inside of school that align with outside of school realities; it is an approach that empowers students to examine and critique what they are learning in the classroom and make connections to the real world. Teachers create learning environments where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate (more fully) in the multiple discourses available in a learning context by consuming information, as well as helping to deconstruct and (re)construct it (Freire, 1998).

1.2 The Current Project

OST organizations are in a unique position to support adolescent identity development. Murray and Milner (2015) have advocated for the use of asset-based frameworks like Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in OST settings because they can empower students to examine and critique what they are learning in the classroom, make connections to the real world, and encourage them to think critically about issues in their community such as poverty, unemployment, violence, incarceration, and crime. The current project used a qualitative research approach to investigate the value of an asset-based literacy afterschool program for ten high school-aged Black and Hispanic youth. Consistent with sociocultural perspectives, program staff engaged

readers with both content and the surrounding environment, manifested in social interactions like adults' messages about reading and student-to-student conversations about books.

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current project was developed through a community-academic partnership between The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) and Urban Promise Trenton (UPT)'s StreetLeader program. UPT is dedicated to empowering 1st through 12th-grade students through afterschool programs that support academic goals, as well as foster growth, leadership, and professional development. The current study focused on the high school leadership program during the 2020-21 academic year when programming was completely virtual because the COVID-19 Pandemic forced school and community program closures.

2.1 Program Context and Description

Home to about 90,000 residents, Trenton individuals and families face challenges in the areas of household income, education, and community health. 26.2% of families live below the poverty line, the median household income is $44,444, and 15.6% of residents have attained a Bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). According to Mercer County's Community Need Index (CNI) – an average of five socioeconomic barrier indicators (income, cultural barriers, education, health insurance, housing) – Trenton's demand for community healthcare services is very high. 2016-2020 CNI scores from Trenton neighborhoods ranged from 4.2 to 5.0; 5.0 is the maximum score, and the US national average was 3.0. Trenton zip codes also held the top five scores in Mercer County for self-reported mental health concerns and need for services. Residents reported experiencing high rates of ACEs (e.g., trauma exposure, parent mental health problems, racism, family dysfunction), and Trenton's 2020/2021 homicide rates were among the highest in the nation, particularly for young adults (Trenton Health Team, 2022).

While the program's main emphasis is academic success, UPT focuses on the whole student and supplements learning in the areas of life skills, etiquette, economic sufficiency, and social-emotional learning (e.g., anger management, conflict resolution). The program supports students with a range of skills and motivation levels and tries to meet them where they are to promote individual growth. Participants in the current study represented UPT StreetLeaders (SLs), high school youth students selected through an application process to serve as positive role models and contributors to the community. To earn the program stipend, SLs had to maintain a minimum GPA and engage in programming to develop their leadership skills and support activities for 1st-8th grade students in the general afterschool program.

UPT places a heavy emphasis on academics through its literacy and college readiness programs. StreetLeaders receive academic support 4 days/week and participate in a literacy program 2 days/week. During the literacy program, students read and analyze literature selected to provide context for personal statements and writing samples, which often ask students to define who they are through writing. Consistent with an asset-based framework, the program views students' identities and experiences as strengths to propel academic achievement and the development of agentic learners. Asset-based pedagogies deepen the sociocultural perspective by promoting texts that encourage students to draw connections between their lives and the world, enabling them to understand how their realities and literacy

intersect with their surroundings. By bridging students' out-of-school literacies to school tasks, the afterschool program aims to support academic achievement, as well as shape youths' motivation and purposes for reading.

In the current study, reading groups were composed of 8-10 students, and each person received a copy of the reading. Taking turns, students read each line of text out loud and analyzed passages of significant literature, including Jack London's The Call of the Wild, John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun), historical documents and speeches (e.g., The Declaration of Independence, MLK Jr.'s I Have a Dream speech), articles (e.g., Ta-Nehisi Coates' The Case for Reparations), and current events from publications like The New York Times and The Washington Post. Given the history of disenfranchisement for minoritized communities, one learning objective the reading groups emphasized was the notion that all people are entitled to full personhood. Using characters from a book to teach lessons provided students an opportunity to receive and accept the lesson directly because they were not the focus of the lesson. Rather, the focus of the teaching moment was the fictional character; students were simply observers. John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men was presented as an exemplary tool for teaching that all people are entitled to full personhood, and that once we see all people as fully human – entitled to a life of dignity, respect, and justice in the form of equal protection under the law – our own likelihood of prosperity only increases.

2.2 Participants and Procedures

At the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, 18 youth and young adults enrolled in the Youth Leadership program were invited to participate in the current project. Ten youths (8 female, 2 male) with a mean age of 15.90 (SD = 1.45; range = 14 to 18) agreed to participate in this study. Six of these youth identified as African-American and four identified as Hispanic.

Prior to collecting data, researchers obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board to carry out all study procedures. The Principal Investigator of the study obtained informed consent from all youth and parents (for youth who were under 18 years old). Program youth were asked to participate in a face-to-face confidential, semi-structured interview at the end of the program in June 2021. The Principal Investigator of this study trained four advanced, undergraduate Psychology students to complete the research interviews. The interview included a series of open-ended questions about program value and experiences, especially the Literacy Program (see Table 1). We also collected information about demographic characteristics. Given the fully virtual format of programming, research interviews were conducted via Zoom and took about 45 minutes. Youths were compensated $25 for their participation.

3.0 RESULTS

Interview data were analyzed using Atlas.ti, with interviews serving as the unit of analysis. Using a line-by-line reading of the interview transcripts, four research team members developed codes to identify and organize common thoughts between participants (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). The team met throughout the coding process to resolve discrepancies and ensure that later interviews did not generate new codes (i.e., saturation, Saunders et al., 2018). This process resulted in four overarching codes and definitions for the initial codebook: (1) value of relationships and a culture of connectedness; (2) emphasis on

learning opportunities and preparation for the future; (3) role of community in identity development and (4) power of reading groups to support youth development. To ensure coding accuracy, the four researchers used the code definitions to analyze all 10 interviews and met regularly to discuss and resolve discrepancies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). McCracken (1988) suggests that six to eight cases are needed to examine specific topics accurately. As such, we were reasonably confident that our study included enough participants to address our research questions and reach the point of saturation (i.e., no new information revealed in the data).

Our qualitative data highlighted two critical features of the program: (1) relationship-building and a culture of connectedness; and (2) the role of community in identity development. Results also underscored how these features can contribute to healthy youth development by supporting asset-based reading groups.

3.1 Relationship-Building and a Culture of Connectedness

Participants highlighted the importance of relationships and a culture of connectedness they experienced in the program. They reflected on the value of receiving and giving support and how these experiences shaped diverse and meaningful interactions between program leaders, high school youth leaders, and K-8 program participants.

> *It was one time I came into the program after school when I wasn't really at my best… I just got to the point where I couldn't do it, and the staff noticed and they pulled me to the side to like talk to me, without forcing me to talk at all or anything like that, which was actually a way to make me feel better… I learned how to be more caring for other people and how to like love more people because, instead of being like a selfish person, I learned how to be more open and caring with everybody around me, instead of just certain people.*

Youth leaders specifically recognized the depth and value of relationships at the program as they navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

> *While COVID was happening, [The Program] was still functioning through Zoom, which we didn't like it – that it was through zoom. We like the program more physically, but [The Program] was still looking out for campers and Youth Leaders, where they would like send a food basket home, bringing us ShopRite gift cards, or finding clothes for us to go to graduation – things like that, which really helped a lot. And the fact that the program was still working through COVID, I just found that real powerful for them to still be trying to manage their own problems and then still trying to manage our problems at the same time. They help you in many ways that sometimes you're really thankful for having that person and having that program to help you because many others aren't willing to help you.*

Youth leaders reflected on how the culture and power of connectedness seemed to permeate all relationships between adults and young people at the program.

> *The staff makes not only just us, but the kids [K-8 participants] too, feel like we could come to one another about our feelings and we can share our feelings no matter what the problem is.…*

[The Program] helped me see that everybody's going through something. Nothing's perfect, especially working with the kids for four years, you know? Not every kid is going to have a good day. Nobody's perfect, and you know I got to really see that. Regardless of how my day was going, I know [Staff Member] definitely said this as well… She was one of the biggest leaders for me to tell me like, you know, to tell all the Youth Leaders, "Take whatever you've been going through and just leave it aside for just a few hours and really try to bond with these kids and really try to put them first." Because, at the end of the day, they're kids and you know we're kids as well, but you know our mission is to really just be a leader and really to have respect and make them feel good about themselves — make them feel like they can be safe. Being a Youth Leader has helped me have more patience with younger children.

3.2 Role of Community in Identity Development

When asked about the program's impact, youth leaders reflected on their individual identities and how their experiences with the program shaped their interests and influenced how they viewed themselves.

It allowed me to see the value in myself, to see that I'm more than just a kid that comes from the city of Trenton. It showed me that I can do things like become a leader, help others, and just invest in myself. And it definitely showed me more characteristics of me, such as I like to help people and I like working with kids.

One youth leader noted that engaging in diverse activities and feeling supported encouraged youth to express themselves and consider their connections to a world beyond just themselves.

I learned more about myself and my community. It's like a place where you can express yourself and, as you start to express yourself in that place, you understand that you can express yourself towards the world and towards others that you trust more... It changed me, it changed my thinking about school, like what I want to be. It also improved me with helping others, change of attitude, and higher independence level.

Power of Group Reading to Support Youth Development

When asked about the small reading groups, youth leaders shared reflections that were supported by the general themes – relationship-building, community, identity development.

It also helped me grow with my peers and make us stronger as a group. I feel as though the more books we read that bring us as a collective, a more of a strong, tight bond we have together.

Specifically, the program leader's approach to guided reading helped youth think critically about the role of community in identity development.

[Program Leader] told me that I had to read a book again and I am like why am I reading again but asked me see now I can I understand, more especially, because this is like my second reading and what I understand is that how they have talked about the world, they described the beauty of the world, and how they describe moments of things.

Like the story of Frankenstein and how he created this creature that looks up to him and I feel like the way he looks up to him is how you're a Christian or anybody of faith you look up to God.

In addition, targeted discussions of fictional characters helped students understand themselves and others as human beings with complex interactions, emotions and motivations.

We just recently read Frankenstein and how like he was getting judged for his looks and stuff like that and not judged for his character and his like his heart. People only see a monster and his creator didn't even accept him. So his whole life, he's been judged before people got to know him and it really taught me that, like you can't really judge people by their looks. I try to understand who they are, as a person.

Another participant reflected on messages from the play, "A Raisin in the Sun:"

I would say a lesson I learned from it is never be afraid to be different. Not everybody is the same person; just because you're not like somebody else doesn't mean that you don't fit in just like they will.

In addition to themes about relationships, community, and identity development, youth leaders noted that the reading groups helped them to explore deeper issues about humanity and the complexity of their own feelings, such as how we perceive and treat other people, how we persevere, and how we dream for ourselves.

I really like this book [The Outsiders] because it does give you like a kind of impact that even though they're from different towns and they dress differently, they all end up having the same emotions and how they feel I would say. And this other book we read was "Frankenstein" and it showed you that people who you think portray as like the evil person might not always be the bad person in the situation, it could be the people causes the things in their lives and make them that way.

One youth leader reflected on how the program leader gave them Tupac Shakur's, "The Rose That Grew From Concrete" to read on their own time.

It's called "A Rose That Grew From Concrete" or something like that and I really like it. I really like Tupac and I feel like he has a lot of inspiration and inspirational things to say and it really just motivates me because I like writing poems. So to see him write poems I'm like, wow. It motivates me to make my own poem and do that, so that's why I like that book.

Another youth leader offered personal reflections about the book, "Of Mice and Men:"

There's so much more I learned from the book. I just remember after reading it crying because I think at the end he has to end the life of his friend. I feel like that definitely. That's what I learned – that in life there's gonna be things that are going to be really hard but you're going to have to do it um and it might not make sense to a lot of people, but it will make sense to you. But it'll be hard and definitely love what you have in the moment to cherish everything that you have because you never know when it's gone.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The current study's asset-based afterschool program aimed to promote literacy and youth development in an underserved Trenton community that has experienced disproportionate levels of stress, violence, and trauma. Through one-on-one interviews, youth leaders shared that reading groups helped them understand how their realities and academic work intersect with the world. They valued engaging with culturally relevant literature, and the critical analysis helped them to navigate complex feelings and situations. By design, students were encouraged to think critically about people, places, and aspirations beyond their current circumstances and discuss complex emotions characters experienced (e.g., joy, sadness, vulnerabilities, hope, and belongingness). The Program Director selected readings to help students define who they are through writing, and because the reading groups consider characters from a book – where students are observers in the lives of fictional people – they could discuss emotions and circumstances without having to reveal information about themselves.

According to youth leaders, the program's approach cultivated a culture of connectedness and allowed them to experience the role of community in identity development. This finding supports sociocultural beliefs that effective learning environments embrace a sense of community (beyond being just cognitively stimulating spaces) and literacy is a social practice whereby the surrounding environment shapes students' motivation and learning (Lager, 2001; Francois, 2021). Through critical discussions, the program aimed to elicit youths' diverse experiences and build empathy, an approach in line with Cook-Sather's (2022) recommendations to consider literacy as a life capacity (not simply a language competency) developed in relationships and in real human circumstances. Indeed, the reading groups established a sense of community where students were motivated to explore complex thoughts and emotions through literary texts, such as how we perceive and treat other people, how we persevere, and how we dream for ourselves.

An important implication is that asset-based pedagogies can empower youth to examine and critique what they are learning in afterschool settings and make connections to the real world. Murray and Milner (2015) have argued that Out-of-School (OST) programs are in a unique position to increase youths' sociopolitical consciousness to help transform inequitable societal conditions. They recommend that OST learning contexts develop students' cultural, community, and social context awareness through projects, readings, and experiences; as students become more aware of themselves, others, and their communities, it is important to develop skills to critically examine their developing knowledge and awareness. In the current study, readings were carefully selected to help youth identify and investigate parallels between historical texts and culturally relevant socio-political issues. During a typical program year, youth leaders engage in community service projects to help them further investigate how their realities and academic work intersect with critical issues in their community, such as poverty, unemployment, violence, incarceration, and crime. While the service component of the program was not possible because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the program's commitment to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy aligns with calls from experts in urban education, psychology, and public health to re-center culture and identity to promote youth development (Chung et al., 2018; Ginwright, 2015; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2021).

Several study limitations are worth noting. First, the project was not designed as a comprehensive research evaluation; rather, data were collected to help program leaders more fully understand the value of using an asset-based approach in their literacy program, as well as serve as a tool to support visioning for future initiatives. As such, the current study had limited data and it is unclear how youths' perspectives have been shaped by other components of the afterschool program (e.g., leadership training); in addition, access to additional individual-level (e.g., degrees of English fluency for youth) and context-level (e.g., exposure to asset-based pedagogy at school) data could help to improve the validity of study findings and inform future program development. Second, this program transitioned unexpectedly to a virtual format because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a range of expected and unexpected shifts in programming and youth experiences. Only 56% of the program's youth leaders participated in the study, likely due to COVID-related stressors (e.g., inconsistent internet connection, inconsistent program attendance due to increased medical and family responsibilities) and Zoom fatigue (students were attending both school and afterschool programming via Zoom). Despite this limitation, the online environment – while posing challenges – allowed the program to continue, which may have reduced barriers and allowed greater accessibility for some members of the community, especially those with transportation barriers (Grist et al., 2019).

In summary, our findings indicate that an OST asset-based approach to literacy and youth may promote positive youth development by embracing a sense of community and establishing literacy as a social practice. OST settings are in a unique position to shape youths' motivation, engagement, and overall well-being, as the context surrounding literacy activities can influence students' identity development and social-emotional outcomes.

REFERENCES

Afterschool Alliance. (2020). America after 3PM: Demand grows, opportunity shrinks. https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/AA3PM-National-Report.pdf

Assarroudi, A., Nabavi, F. H., Armat, M. R., Ebadi, A., & Vaismoradi, M. (2018). Directed qualitative content analysis: The description and elaboration of its underpinning methods and data analysis process. Journal of Research in Nursing, 23(1), 42–55. https:// doi. org/ 10. 1177/ 17449 87117 741667

Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (2000). Literacy practices. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context (pp. 7-15). Routledge.

Capital City Youth Violence Coalition. (2019). Trenton youth safety playbook: Goals, objectives, and recommended strategies for the reduction of youth violence in Trenton, New Jersey. https://ccyvc.pages.tcnj.edu/files/2019/04/CCYVC-Playbook-April-2019.pdf.

Chung, H. L., Jusu, B., Christensen, K., Venescar, P., & Tran, D. (2018). Creative arts and positive youth development in an urban afterschool program. Journal of Community Psychology, 46(2), 187–201.

Cook-Sather, A. (2022). Toward equitable and inclusive school practices: Expanding approaches to "research with" young people. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 66(3), 146–148. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1265

Fergus, S., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2005). Adolescent resilience: A framework for understanding healthy development in the face of risk. Annual Review of Public Health, 26(1), 399–419. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.26.021304.144357

Francois, C. (2021). Expectations, relevance, and relationships: Striving toward ideals for adolescent literacy instruction in an urban secondary school. Reading & Writing Quarterly, 37(5), 462–478. https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2021.1878403

Fredricks, J. A., & Simpkins, S. D. (2012). Promoting positive youth development through organized after-school activities: Taking a closer look at participation of ethnic minority youth. Child Development Perspectives, 6(3), 280–287. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00206.x

Freire, P. (1998). Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Garbarino, J. (2022). The war-zone mentality — mental health effects of gun violence in U.S. children and adolescents. New England Journal of Medicine, 387(13), 1149–1151. https://doi.org/10.1056/nejmp2209422

Ginwright, S. (2015). Hope and healing in urban education: How urban activists and teachers are reclaiming matters of the heart. Routledge.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Aldine Publishing.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. American Educational Research Journal, 32(3), 465–491. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A. K. A. the remix. Harvard Educational Review, 84(1), 74–84. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751

Lee, C. D. (2003). Why we need to re-think race and ethnicity in educational research. Educational Researcher, 32(5), 3–5. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032005003

Mahoney, J. L., Parente, M. E., & Zigler, E. F. (2009). Afterschool programs in America: Origins, growth, popularity, and politics. Journal of Youth Development, 4(3), 23–42. https://doi.org/10.5195/JYD.2009.250

McCracken, G. D. (1988). The long interview (13th ed). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986229

Murray, I. E., & Milner, H. R. (2015). Toward a pedagogy of sociopolitical consciousness in outside of school programs. The Urban Review, 47(5), 893–913. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-015-0339-4

NJ Department of Education. (2021). 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates, Cohorts 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021. https://www.nj.gov/education/schoolperformance/grad/ACGR.shtml

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

O'Donnell, J., & Kirkner, S. L. (2014). Effects of an out-of-school program on Urban High School Youth's academic performance. Journal of Community Psychology, 42(2), 176–190. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21603

Perry, T. (2003). Achieving in post-civil rights America: The outline of a theory. In T. Perry, C. Steele, & A. Hilliard (Eds.), Young, gifted and Black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students (pp. 87–108). Beacon Press.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2009). Promoting self-determined school engagement: Motivation, learning, and well-being. In K. R. Wenzel & A. Wigfield (Eds.), Handbook of motivation at school (pp. 171–195). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. Quality & Quantity, 52(4), 1893–1907. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8

Schwartz, K., Cappella, E., & Seidman, E. (2015). Extracurricular participation and course performance in the Middle Grades: A study of low-income, urban youth. American Journal of Community Psychology, 56(3-4), 307–320. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9752-9

Sciurba, K. (2014). Texts as mirrors, texts as windows. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 58(4), 308–316. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.358

Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). The psychology of literacy. Harvard University Press.

Seal, D., Nguyen, A., & Beyer, K. (2014). Youth exposure to violence in an urban setting. Urban Studies Research, 2014, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1155/2014/368047

Seeger, C., Parsons, S., & View, J. L. (2022). Equity-centered instructional adaptations in high-poverty schools. Education and Urban Society, 54(9), 1027–1051. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245221076088

Street, B. V. (1995). Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education. Longman.

Trenton Health Team. (2020). Health indicators: Mercer County by the numbers. Trenton Health Team. https://trentonhealthteam.org/resources/health-indicators

U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). QuickFacts: Trenton City, NJ. U.S. Department of Commerce. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/trentoncitynewjersey/RHI225218

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4

Woods-Jaeger, B., Briggs, E. C., Gaylord-Harden, N., Cho, B., & Lemon, E. (2021). Translating cultural assets research into action to mitigate adverse childhood experience–related health disparities among African American youth. American Psychologist, 76(2), 326–336. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000779

Yosso, T., Smith, W., Ceja, M., & Solorzano, D. (2009). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates. Harvard Educational Review, 79(4), 659–691. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m707l