

Racial Justice Through Resistance: Important Dimensions of Youth Development for African Americans

BY SHAWN GINWRIGHT

One of the most significant challenges facing the youth development field is its capacity to confront questions of social inequality. Youth development can be described as a process that prepares young people for healthy and productive adulthood. Researchers argue that youth development is an ongoing developmental process that occurs for all youth regardless of the type of family or community support. For young African Americans, who confront structural racism in the schools, communities, and places of employment, the youth development process has been a formidable task. Economic isolation has resulted in almost castelike poverty and posed significant barriers to political engagement. Despite these economic challenges, those of us who spend time with them in their schools, communities, and homes can point to numerous examples of a vibrant political and civic life. An important aspect of youth development and civic participation, we have found, is building a collective sense of racial identity and political consciousness about how structural racism shapes the everyday lives of young African Americans.

For example, “zero tolerance” policies in many urban schools highlight how an understanding of the racial context shapes the youth development process. The idea that youth are becoming more violent and therefore need more discipline and tougher punishment has become an accepted belief among many school officials and disproportionately affects working-class youth of color. Despite the fact that zero tolerance is intended to ensure school safety, these policies can have the opposite effect. Pedro Noguera found that over ten years schools increasingly took on the appearance and function of juve-

nile detention facilities, which contributed to more fights among students and disruptive behavior in the classroom. Instead of dealing with social and economic problems through the curriculum, reports S. Polakow-Suransky, some schools have implemented a variety of punitive measures, including segregating lunches by racial and ethnic groups, requiring student IDs to enter classrooms, constructing fences topped with sharp protruding edges, and increasing police presence on school campuses. These measures increase hostility between young people in these schools and exacerbate tensions between youth and the police.

Policies similar to zero tolerance, which aggravate hostility and violence, have a devastating impact on the youth development processes. James Garbarino has argued that such hostility and violence in urban communities generates “social toxins . . . a term used to represent the degree to which the social world has become poisonous to a person’s well being” (p. 61). Drawing from environmentalists who identified toxins such as lead paint found in older homes and buildings, pesticides in our soil, or poor air quality from local refineries, Garbarino identifies social equivalents to physical toxins, notably violence, poverty, domestic and sexual abuse, family disruption, and racism. African American youth in poor communities are often most vulnerable to the presence of these toxins, and just as physical toxins can reach dangerous levels so too can social toxins severely affect healthy development. Symptoms of a high level of social toxicity might be depression, despair, hopelessness, fear, anger, and pain. For African American youth in urban communities, toxicity manifests itself

through apathy, fatalism, and self-destructive forms of behavior. A deeper understanding of the context in which development occurs gives practitioners greater willingness to address conditions that threaten healthy development.

Challenges of Focus and Approach

The tendency among youth development stakeholders to focus only on individual behavior obscures the collective dimensions of the developmental process. Support systems, opportunities, and social assets are indeed necessary for healthy development, but these same variables are important for communities where young people develop. Collective dimensions of the developmental process suggest a matrix of challenges facing African American youth. An African American young person may individually have supportive relationships, opportunities to grow intellectually, and social assets such as role models but still share a collective experience of discrimination with other African Americans. Although the individual focus of youth development is important, so is analysis of how black youth are socially constructed in public discourse, schooling, and juvenile correction systems.

One could conceptualize the youth development process as a collective response to social and racial marginalization. This would reframe how youth respond, resist, and confront these issues. It is through the collective dimensions of community life that notions of social justice and acting on behalf of the common good arise. This understanding of the youth development process acknowledges structural constraints in communities and views youth as active participants in facilitating neighborhood change through strong social networks. By shifting the focus from individual youth development outcomes to collective dimensions of youth development, we develop a more nuanced understanding of how young people collectively navigate their environments. Research has shown that resisting racial stereotypes and confronting racial inequality in schools and com-

munities can be important protective factors for African American youth. Their capacity to confront, challenge, and change neighborhood issues can in fact promote wellness and healthy development.

Building racial identity and fostering critical consciousness constitute important developmental opportunities for youth who must learn to navigate a world of racial marginalization. Janie Ward noted that “addressing racism, in an open and forthright manner, is essential to building psychological health among African American youth” who have been failed by other social supports, including traditional youth development programming.

Racial Justice, Civic Engagement, and Youth Development

Few would disagree that civic engagement is vital to youth development and healthy democratic life. J. Eccles and J. Gootman, writing for the National Research Council, concluded that “strong moral character” and “commitment to civic engagement” were key elements to fostering social development among youth. Civic engagement is an important part of development; young people who have a history of racial discrimination, poverty, and police harassment have their own strategies for civic and political engagement. Civic engagement for minority youth is often a function of history, social class, and social context in which they live. Activism among African American youth is often shaped by cultural and political interpretations and assumptions that emerge from their experience of being black in white America. Without a more nuanced understanding of African American youth political interpretations, we fail to understand the significance of the role of racial justice in youth development strategies. Racial justice strategies in youth development may entail building racial identity and solidarity, developing political consciousness of racial oppression, or organizing peers to change unfair race-based school policies.

Focusing on racial justice for African American youth not only represents a critical strategy for resistance and survival; it poses important developmental opportunities as well. J. Ward documented how resistance and challenging racial hostilities promoted esteem and positive psychological development among African American girls. She argued that “the refusal to allow oneself to become stifled by victimization or to accept an ideology of blaming the victim entails the development of a critical perspective on the world” that enables black youth to resist racial oppression (p. 54). Learning how to navigate, confront, and deal with racism is critical to the youth developmental process because it yields dramatically different outcomes from those outlined in most youth development literature. Because racial justice efforts have an explicit focus on social change rather than individual development, they encourage African American youth to understand how institutional racism structures their opportunities and affects their moral, mental, and spiritual health. Moreover, the capacity to confront, resist, and challenge racism requires quite different skills from those ordinarily associated with youth development processes.

Examining the means by which African American youth contest, challenge, and negotiate their racial identity in a hostile racist environment exposes the social forces responsible for reproducing racial inequality for youth and enriches the discourse on the relationship between youth development and civic and community life. Racial justice approaches contribute to youth development outcomes by building positive racial identity and fostering a collective consciousness about community and social issues.

Race, Resistance, and Youth Development Among African American Youth: Examples in Oakland, California

Developing strategies by which youth directly confront these issues helps young people heal from the traumatic impact of racism and develop positive

racial identity. An incident that several young people in Oakland, California, shared with me during a political education seminar comes to mind. David, a sixteen-year-old resident of Oakland, told me of an encounter with the police that unfortunately is not uncommon for African American youth in urban communities. While driving home from a basketball game at a local high school, he and his friends were stopped by the police and their car was searched. David said that when he told the police they were simply going home and had no right to search the car, the officer pulled him from the driver’s seat and slammed him on the hood of the police car. It was a hot day and the police car had been driving around all day, which made the hood of the car incredibly hot. He explained that the officer must have known how hot the hood of the car was because he held David’s face on the hood for a long time, which severely burned his face. In 2004, several members of the Oakland Police Department were formally charged with willful misconduct for similar violations and were removed from their post. David wondered, “Where do you go when you need protection from the police? When I am out there I feel like a target for the police. People see me, and look at the way I dress, and treat me less than a man, less than human! I feel like a target for self-destruction! Sometimes I feel like giving up. But being black means that I have to be strong because black people have gone through so much.”

Recognizing that such practices were not isolated incidents but rather systemic, David and several of his friends decided to videotape examples of young African Americans being targeted by the police. With the assistance of Leadership Excellence, an Oakland-based youth agency that provides identity development and activist training to African American youth, they developed a survey that was distributed citywide to further document these incidents. Additionally, through mapping software, they were able to illustrate the location and time that reported violations occurred in predominantly African American neighborhoods and within one to

two hours after school during weekdays. This evidence was included in a report distributed to local school officials, the chief of police, and city council members. Even though the report in itself did not transform policing practices, community pressure from several organizations as well as constant news coverage of these issues encouraged an investigation that ultimately led to the removal of several OPD officers.

Their capacity to address racism in police practices was a combination of both positive racial identity development and a critical consciousness derived from the direct experience of police harassment. Confronting structural racism provides a way for youth to engage in civic life that matters to them. As a result, young people develop a sense of agency to change things and foster a sense of purpose and future.

Encounters with structural racism often yield a number of collectively shared experiences; without a racial justice analysis of these experiences, other youth development goals (feeling of safety and belonging, and psychological wellness, for example) are more difficult to achieve. Understanding both the political and personal dimensions of racism allows youth to move away from self-blame and shame. It fosters a critical worldview that is shaped by the particular social, economic, and political position. An important element of a racial justice strategy is to explore the collective and personal dimensions of racism. J. Quiroz-Martinez and colleagues reported that one core aspect of racial justice strategies among youth development organizations was to engage young people in critical examination of root causes of the personal issues they face and create opportunities for them to process painful experiences from racial oppression. A racial justice strategy cannot be restricted to confronting external barriers to racial equity but must also create opportunities for young people to heal from racial trauma in their lives. Youth development programs and community-based organizations are among the only

opportunities African American youth have to address painful issues of racial violence. Racial justice strategies force us to reconsider how youth development practices connect the personal to the collective dimensions of civic and political life.

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Lateefa, a sixteen-year-old mother, illustrates this point. Learning that she was pregnant, she went to sign up for a free child care center at her school that allows parenting mothers to complete their studies without having to drop out in order to care for their children. She was told that the school board had decided to close the center and discontinue the program because of lack of enrollment. Lateefa challenged the district's decision to close the center. She conceptualized the closure as racial discrimination by "writing off black pregnant girls as statistics who were not interested in graduating anyway." She explained to me how she organized twelve other teen mothers and forced school officials to keep the child care center open by bringing their small children to a press conference held by the superintendent and handing him each child one by one. When he asked what they were doing, they responded, "We need someone to watch our children while we go to school. If you don't reopen this center, then maybe you can watch our children when we go to school and try to get an education!"

A racial justice analysis reframed Lateefa's personal issue from being a powerless black and pregnant teen statistic to an active community member with the capacity to challenge the school district to meet her needs as a new mother. Ultimately, as a result of the center reopening, Lateefa graduated from high school and now attends San Jose State University.

Conclusions

There are three lessons we can draw from racial justice approaches to youth development.

First, youth development should be conceptualized in relationship to specific economic, political, and social conditions. In communities abandoned by political leaders and ravaged by violence, crime, and poverty, activism and youth development among African American young people is often fostered, developed, and sustained through community-based organizations that prepare them to confront quality-of-life issues. This approach does not assume that all youth enjoy the same relative social, economic, and racial privileges. A deeper understanding of these conditions expands what constitutes good youth development and realigns youth development strategies with the realities of race in America.

Second, rather than focusing on individual dimensions of behavior, the youth development process should be seen as a collective response to social marginalization of young people. When we apply this principle to African American youth, racial marginalization becomes central to the way we look at their lives. Resisting, challenging, and confronting racial inequality are outcomes of youth development and necessary processes for survival. From this perspective, we more clearly understand the collective dimensions of civic life among African American youth through shared racial group experiences. Their capacity to foster a positive racial identity and collective consciousness is the key to healthy community life and wellness.

Third, young people are important political actors, not passive subjects of social change. Young people are producers of knowledge and can act to transform their social world. Given the vibrant role of African American young people in the civil rights and black power movements, we should understand the critical importance of racial justice strategies in both the developmental process and social

change movements. Today, viewing youth as political actors gives us a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes activism for African American youth in urban communities. African American youth bring unique political perspectives and experiences that often yield new forms of civic engagement. For example, black youth in urban communities struggle not to get caught up in a complex system of control and containment, and their identity is often constructed in resistance to such racist stereotypes and unjust public policies. Their struggle for identity is played out through expression of new or revived cultural forms such as hip-hop culture, rap music, and various types of political or religious nationalism that redefine, reassert, and constantly reestablish what it means to be urban and black.

Being black in a society dominated by whites is by nature political. This social positioning requires collective strategies among families and communities to engender the notion of resistance to racial oppression. The adage common among working-class African American families that “you gotta be twice as good as white folk to make it” is a hidden form of racial resistance that early on shapes African American youth political identity. A racial justice approach to youth development acknowledges and embraces these important forms of political knowledge, and directs us toward more holistic and collective dimensions of civic life for African American youth.

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