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Brittian's research examines the relationships between ethnic minority youth and their environment, such as aspects of identity (racial, ethnic, and cultural) and socialization that promote positive development. Brittian has conducted research in the United States and in South Africa. Her goal is to identify pathways to positive development and to make recommendations for culturally informed practice, prevention, and policy.

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FOSTERING POSITIVE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN URBAN YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

Introduction

How do urban youth organizations address the cultural needs and experiences of youth of color?

Identity formation is an important developmental process in which a young person comes to understand his or her place in the world. Adolescents who have achieved a healthy or positive sense of identity are more likely to have positive social behaviors (e.g. civic engagement, positive peer relationships, and other pro-social behaviors) and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (e.g. drug or alcohol abuse). In an urban setting, the identity development of African American and Latino youths may be impacted negatively by environmental factors (e.g. ethnic segregation, poverty, community violence, and negative race-related experiences). In addition to supportive home environments, youth-serving organizations are another resource that can provide critically valuable support for urban youth. Although a central goal of many youth organizations is to facilitate positive identity development, such as understanding one's place in various social settings, the extent to which these organizations do work that positively contributes to youth's racial and ethnic identity is unknown. The purpose of this research is to investigate how urban youth organizations address the cultural needs and experiences of African American and Latino adolescents.

This ongoing project uses interviews with program directors and observations of youth organizations to understand how youth organizations support the identity development of youth who are racial and ethnic minorities.

Preliminary Findings

- Consistent with prior research, we found that most programs focused on education (tutoring, college preparation), prevention efforts (substance use, teen pregnancy), physical and mental health promotion, and providing services (access to healthcare, employment training).
- Some programs framed their youth practice from a cultural strengths-based approach: developing youth's ethnic or racial pride through curriculum and activities; visits to Historically Black Colleges and Universities.
- Others demonstrated a unique understanding of their youth's context: discussions with youth about race relations; conversation to prepare youth for racial bias; cultural sensitivity (e.g. knowledge of African American history and culture).

Recommendations

This project and its findings have implications for understanding how urban youth's environment influences adolescent identity development. Considerable financial resources are allocated annually to youth organizations in an attempt to alleviate problem behaviors among youth associated with lack of adult supervision. Youth programs that target urban youth of color frequently focus on prevention of risk behaviors (e.g. delinquency, substance use and sexual risk behaviors). Some programs are under pressure to frame youth negatively in order to obtain funding. Therefore, policy makers should support and advocate for effective and holistic program models that seek to enhance urban youth's positive development, rather than merely reduce anticipated risk behaviors. Research and scholarship to better understand how youth programs work to promote positive development, particularly among youth of color, is also needed and will help make programs more effective and engaging for children.

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