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Promoting Critical Consciousness: The Role of Positive Youth Development Programming

Mackenzie Jaclyn Hart

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PROMOTING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: THE ROLE OF POSITIVE YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

by

Mackenzie Jaclyn Hart

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Accepted by:

Samuel McQuillin, Director of Thesis

Kimberly Hills, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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Many thanks to the research mentors who have provided me guidance and support.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of positive youth development programming and individual-level characteristics in promoting critical reflection (CR) in youth and adolescent participants. CR refers to the analytical component of critical consciousness (CC), or the exercise of challenging institutional practices that systemically marginalize or oppress certain subgroups. Survey and interview data were analyzed from at-risk high school students (N=250) participating in an after-school program across six sites in urban areas in the United States. Multiple regression models were used to predict the development of CR, and interviews were examined to look for themes related to quantitative findings. Results support that youths' growth mindsets lead to the development of CR, and highlight demographic trends among participants who were more likely to exhibit higher levels of CR than their peers. Findings also show promise for systems-level programming affecting the emergence of critical consciousness, particularly if programming exposes participants to new experiences.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Critical consciousness (CC) is a dual-component construct, defined by an individual's awareness of systemic inequities faced by marginalized populations, as well as that individual's consequent plans of action to address the injustices (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). There is limited research on how critical consciousness emerges or changes across individuals, times, and contexts, though the construct is associated with many benefits: Levels of CC have previously been positively correlated with self-efficacy, agency, and academic performance, and negatively correlated with disciplinary referrals and high school drop-out (El-Amin et al., 2017). Given the encouraging attributes related to critical consciousness, it is useful to investigate the emergence and development of the construct, with particular interest in a positive youth development (PYD) setting. PYD offers a unique lens through which to study CC, given 1) the broad reach of PYD programming and, 2) that many of the desired outcomes of PYD overlap with the aforementioned advantages of CC. Thus, the primary aim of this paper is to identify environmental and individual factors that may serve as facilitators or barriers to critical consciousness, in the setting of a PYD program in the United States.

Individual factors of interest to this study range from demographic variables such as age, race, and gender, to psychological constructs such as growth mindset and mindfulness. Environmental characteristics that will be considered include specific programming opportunities afforded to the students, as well as time spent (in years)

involved with the PYD initiative. Results are derived from a combination of quantitative surveys issued to youths in the program and qualitative responses via interviews with participants. The desired outcome of this study is to identify personal characteristics and program structure or content that can be successful in building critical consciousness in youths and adolescents, with hopes that the knowledge can be applied to future initiatives to bolster overall outcomes for students.

Critical Consciousness

Historical Development

The idea of critical consciousness was first introduced by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher in the 1960's and 1970's (Jemal, 2017). In teaching basic literacy skills, Freire noted that many of his adult students were unable to learn, which he postulated was due to blunted self-efficacy. As such, Freire revised his pedagogy and encouraged his students to identify, question, and challenge the oppressive forces in their lives. Freire named this approach "critical pedagogy," and asserted that its desired individual-level outcome would be "critical consciousness," or awareness of repressive forces and actions targeted to address them. Freire's early work in critical consciousness—and subsequent successes in teaching formerly disempowered individuals—illustrated both the importance of the construct, and Freire's belief that it could be instilled and enhanced in people.

Current Conceptualization

The original, twofold definition of CC has withstood time and empirical scrutiny: Research has replicated Freire's anecdotal findings of critical social analysis and societal involvement informing and advancing one another, on both individual and community

levels (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). For example, Diemer, Rapa, Voight, and McWhirter (2016) found that individuals with higher levels of CC also had higher levels of awareness and motivation to address oppressive sociopolitical forces. The same study found that on a larger scale, communities that have more critically conscious residents often see higher rates of volunteerism and activism (Diemer et al., 2016). In addition to these benefits, CC has been linked to higher resilience and increased perceptions of agency, as well as to persistence in school and higher scholastic aptitude in adolescents (El-Amin et al., 2017). Given the widespread benefits associated with the construct, developing critical consciousness with specific attention to youths and adolescents is a worthwhile endeavor.

However, at present there is limited knowledge of how critical consciousness emerges, and if and how the construct changes over time and across individuals. This trend is likely due to the lack of testability in current, theoretical models of the development of critical consciousness: The only existing model of the development of CC (Diemer et al., 2016) was founded on Freire's original writings and posits that critical consciousness has three core elements (versus Freire's original two); yet, each element lacks grounding in applying the constructs to real-life exemplar situations, and in instructing the promotion of these constructs in actionable detail.

The Diemer et al. (2016) model claims that the pillars of critical consciousness are 1) critical reflection, 2) critical motivation, and 3) critical action. Critical reflection (CR) refers to an individual's recognition and questioning of unjust social structures in communities (Diemer et al., 2016), and is analogous to the first component of CC posited by Freire, which consisted of analyzing and understanding social forces. Also echoing

Freire's beliefs and practices, the revised model of CC development notes that CR is often a learned process. The second pillar of the revised CC model, critical motivation or critical efficacy, refers to an individual's belief in their own ability to effect change, as well as their commitment to a given cause. Critical motivation, though not included in Freire's original two-pronged definition, bridges the psychological and behavioral processes of critical reflection and critical action. Critical action, the third part of the revised model, refers to the effort an individual devotes to enacting change.

Diemer's model, in addition to having roots in Freire's definition, echoes previous work by Watts and Flanagan (2007), who postulated that individuals' ability to identify and reflect on societal forces, and their corresponding behaviors targeted to address such forces, mutually inform and advance one another. Moreover, Watts and Flanagan (2007) commented on the importance of having opportunities to practice reflection and engage in targeted actions, stating that these outlets could moderate the emergence of critical consciousness. In synthesizing this work, it is reasonable to speculate that programming—specifically that which teaches and encourages reflection, and provides opportunities for societal involvement—plays an important role in promoting critical consciousness. Thus, the aim of the current study is to identify programming factors in a PYD program that could enhance or impede the development of participants' critical consciousness. In further understanding these programming factors, this study also examines individual factors such as demographics and time spent in the program.

Existing Research

With the aforementioned goals in mind, a brief review follows of past programming initiatives that aimed to instill CC in youth and adolescent participants.

These studies were identified using a literature search (see PRISMA diagram in Appendix for details), and a select subset of the programs is reviewed below. Initial search terms included “developing critical consciousness,” “promoting critical consciousness,” and “critical consciousness programming.” Beyond database searching, some articles were identified through the reference sections of other papers and via the personal websites of leaders in the field. Abstracts were screened for explicit mention to critical consciousness; those that did not include the term were excluded. The remaining full-text articles were then screened to ensure that they included data or had an empirical component (i.e. were not limited to theory), and that they were relevant to youths, adolescents, or those who work directly with children. Lastly, articles with fewer than three findings or outcome variables were excluded. The programs included below were selected based on their representativeness of articles that remained following the inclusion processes detailed above. Within this literature, three predominant methods by which critical consciousness has been built were identified.

Instructional curriculum. The first promising method for promoting CC is embedding CC practices into academic curricula, such as the Mexican-American Studies (MAS) curriculum piloted by the Tucson (Arizona) Unified School District (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014). This study was conducted over the course of seven yearlong periods, and called for students to examine the historical experiences of Mexican-Americans with specific attention to racism and marginalization throughout history. Students were encouraged to compare their coursework to traditional instruction, and thus made aware that such instruction would exclude the experiences of minority

populations. Teachers structured class discussions and assignments to foster student connection-drawing between historical events and their own life experiences.

Other scholars took a similar approach and infused instruction in critical consciousness into a high school English literature class (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). In this trial of promoting CC, students explored present-day television and movies, hip-hop music, and popular books, and were asked to identify ways by which culture—with particular attention to race and class—affected their own daily experiences, such as opportunities for schooling and the social expectations surrounding individual achievement. Educators encouraged empowerment and agency via class assignments and discussions. Moreover, one unit of the class was devoted to studying political and societal implications of widespread systematic injustices, further enforcing critical reflection.

Both of the studies noted above showed promising results: Following each intervention, students scored higher on measures of critical consciousness such as reporting an increased willingness to engage in social justice activities, and heightened beliefs that their involvement would be impactful in their communities. Moreover, participation in the MAS-based academic program was significantly positively correlated with students' passing rates on state standardized tests, as well as graduation rates, compared to students who completed a more traditional history curriculum.

Extracurricular programming. In seeking to promote critical consciousness outside of an academic curriculum, Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999) developed a “Young Warriors” after-school program for African-American males attending an urban high school. The Young Warriors program spanned eight weeks, with students attending

one after-school session per week. Similar to the aforementioned English curriculum project, this program engaged its participants through popular media including music and television, and challenged students to question the societal implications of these pervasive messages. As part of the study, researchers analyzed participants' written analyses of various cultural stimuli. At the conclusion of the study, authors reported that participants included more themes related to critical consciousness in these analyses; however, authors also noted that findings were null with regards to participants' internalized (i.e. motivation and self-efficacy) and action (i.e. civic engagement and activism) measures related to CC.

Teacher education. Zion, Allen, and Jean (2015) developed a novel approach to fostering youths' critical consciousness by devising an intervention for teachers. All participants in this study were white females who taught middle-school students predominantly of minority backgrounds and in low-resource communities. This intervention spanned the course of two semesters in a graduate-level seminar focused on civic engagement. Student teachers first were exposed to the inequities their students face through readings and discussions, as well as through observations. Later, they were taught to engage their students in critical dialog, such as by leading discussions that would question the role of race and culture in social inequities. As a result of this project, teachers reported increased understanding of their own roles in systems of oppression, as well as increased understanding of how large-scale systems harm their students. Lastly, teachers reported that they felt confident they had developed skills to take action through having these conversations with their students, suggesting that this approach was effective in building critical consciousness.

Non-intervention efforts. Although different from the studies above in that it did not involve a traditional intervention, it is worth noting a recent attempt to compare various teaching approaches and identify pedagogical practices associated with the emergence of critical consciousness (Seider, Tamerat, Clark & Soutter, 2017). Aside from the current study, Seider et al. (2017) is the only explicit existing query of indirect factors (i.e. elements outside of direct interventions) that may promote CC, making it relevant to the current research question. Findings from Seider et al. (2017) suggested that problem-posing teaching models, or those that involve educators introducing issues like racism in a way that welcomes collaborative discussion, were correlated with higher critical thinking in students than were instructional models like no-excuses (which is characterized by extended school days and strict discipline). Expeditionary learning models, on the other hand, were correlated with increased civic engagement and activism in their students, compared to other teaching models examined. Authors noted that their findings indicated a trade-off, however, as approaches that putatively supported the development of one aspect of critical consciousness were also often correlated with a relative decrease in other aspects (Seider et al., 2017).

A recent meta-analysis of critical consciousness (Heberle, Rapa, & Farago, 2020) extended the examination of indirect factors in the promotion of CC by tying it to other aspects of youth and adolescent development. These authors highlighted the roles of youth socialization and school climate in bolstering levels of critical consciousness. However, each examination they cited was nested in an intervention aimed to boost CC. This collective work is valuable as it suggests that systems-level decisions, such as pedagogical approaches, programming, or leadership can effectively promote (or impede)

the development of critical consciousness. However, this work simultaneously highlights the complexities inherent in the development of CC, and the need for thoughtfulness in designing CC programming.

Summary and Synthesis of Factors that Affect CC

Considered collectively, the results of the studies reviewed above provide further support for the important role that critical consciousness plays in promoting positive outcomes, especially for youths and adolescents. Moreover, these results may elucidate trends across successful initiatives, and help to identify potential associations between the emergence of critical consciousness and programming factors. For example, most of the aforementioned programs used modeling and explicit teaching while introducing participants to CC concepts. This commonality may suggest that in order to effectively instill critical consciousness in youths, direct instruction is necessary—though whether or not this is true is not currently addressed in the literature. Similarly, most of these programs used a modified scaffolding approach, moving from critical reflection to critical action, suggesting that teaching skills in a hierarchical order may be necessary. In addition, the majority of these interventions were designed to target high school students in low-resource and/or marginalized communities, perhaps implying that there is an ideal or “target” population in aiming to promote critical consciousness. However, implementing a CC-promoting program for white, middle-class teachers was also effective, suggesting that demographic factors might be less relevant to the facilitation or blockage of CC. In relation to the current project, noting these trends provides meaningful guidance in identifying putative large-scale factors that may help elucidate an indirect pathway for building critical consciousness.

Examining these trends in the context of broader psychological literature is also helpful. For example, there is substantial evidence that learning does not only result from explicit teaching, such as in social learning theory, which posits individuals learn through modeling and observation (Bandura, 1971) and experiential learning theory, which posits individuals learn by doing (Kolb, 2014). Both of these types of learning are 1) indirect, and 2) pervasive in everyday life. Considering these findings in conjunction with the belief that critical consciousness is a learned process—as stated in Freire’s original writings, and reiterated in subsequent work—is suggestive that indirect factors indeed affect the development of critical consciousness in adolescents. In fact, it is likely that social and experiential learning underlie the development of critical consciousness, as the core components of CC (i.e. critical reflection and critical action) are experiential and participatory by nature.

Settings; positive youth development. Accordingly, I considered experimental contexts that would also be participatory in nature, in hopes of mirroring or replicating the organic, “real life” developments that result from social and experiential learning. To this end, the present study was nested in the evaluation of a positive youth development (PYD) initiative, or a systems-level approach to programming based in highlighting and expanding upon participants’ existing strengths (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). PYD operates on the pillars of community engagement and contribution (youth.gov; youthpower.org), thereby echoing the foundations of critical consciousness that laud critical action, or the behaviors taken to enact societal change (Watts et al., 2011). As such, PYD program design often results in youth participants that are actively/

experientially involved in their own personal development through various activity outlets and opportunities.

PYD's goal of building networks of engagement across multiple domains of participants' lives, such as schools, communities, peer groups, and family units (Lerner et al., 2005) further suggests that PYD is an optimal context for studying the indirect promotion of critical consciousness. PYD programming is often characterized by its long-term support through natural contacts with participants, versus a discrete number of treatments or prescribed interventions. Moreover, the goals of PYD programming are wide-reaching and include fostering prosocial behaviors and resilience in participants (Lerner et al., 2005). Because these goals are broad, the mechanisms of change often rely on social and experiential learning, such as establishing positive relationships among program leaders and practicing goal setting and progress monitoring activities, respectively (Armour, Sandford, & Duncombe, 2011). Independently and collectively, these features lend to a desirable context for promoting learning outside of direct instruction, which I hypothesize underlies the development of critical consciousness.

In addition to the experiential nature of PYD programming, it often places a focus on connecting participants to resources, and exposing youths and adolescents to a broad range of experiences. Such a model is ideal for the current study, as it allowed me to "cast a wide net" in searching for critical consciousness-related effects of systems-level programming. By proceeding in an exploratory manner, I aimed to maximize the number of programming variables related to CC that I could encompass and identify. Further commonalities between PYD programming and CC development is the goal of PYD to foster individual growth, evidenced by the focus on fulfilling participants' basic needs,

assisting them in overcoming life challenges, and encouraging youths and adolescents to pursue new activities (Armour et al., 2011). The value of personal growth is heavily echoed in the foundations of critical consciousness, which posit that marginalization can be lessened or overcome by reflection and targeted action—both forms of growth. The goals of PYD programming and the positive outcomes of CC share many overlaps, further supporting that PYD provides an quality context for studying the development of CC in youths and adolescents.

Participant characteristics. The sampling frames of previous studies reflect certain demographic trends, such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) populations, and youths and adolescents who are exposed to higher-than-average levels of cultural and socioeconomic risk. Although few studies have addressed racial, ethnic, and developmental differences in programming designed to promote critical consciousness (for an exception, see Osajima, 2007, who discusses college as a critical period in the development of CC), these sampling frames are suggestive that participant demographics may interact with programming experiences in the development of CC, yielding different outcomes in youths and adolescents who share the same or similar experiences.

For example, cognitive development through youth and adolescence is linked to increased reasoning abilities (Dwyer, Hogan, & Stewart, 2014), which underlie individuals' capacities to analyze and think critically about systemic, social forces in their lives. Therefore, cognitive development also presumably underlies an individual's ability to practice CC. Moreover, youths' experiences of oppression and violence have been loosely linked to higher levels of critical consciousness (Heberle et al., 2020), and some

of these experiences may be explained by identity-based marginalization. As such, examining whether critical consciousness levels vary by participants' gender or ethnicity is worthwhile.

Psychological constructs. Previous work has also posited that individuals' critical consciousness levels are linked to more general systems of beliefs and knowledge, or to underlying psychological profiles. For example, Clark and Seider (2020) found that high school students' levels of curiosity were positively correlated with their sociopolitical development, a proxy measure often used for critical consciousness. In their recent meta-analysis of critical consciousness, Heberle and colleagues (2020) claim that, "A key direction for future study will be to examine for whom and under what conditions beliefs...may be related to one another and to the various components of critical consciousness..." (pg. 534). The current study begins to answer that call by measuring adolescent participants' various beliefs, in relation to the same participants' critical consciousness levels.

To identify additional individual traits that may help or hinder the development of critical consciousness, I examined the core tenants of critical consciousness. Then, I searched for similarities between the tenants of CC and those of other, more established psychological constructs. For example, critical reflection is a very mindful process, requiring those who practice it to have sufficient metacognition, or a level of present-moment awareness that allows them to "think about thinking." In critical consciousness, this astute present-moment awareness affords individuals the insight to recognize systematic forces, and how those forces manifest in social inequities. Critical motivation, on the other hand, operates on the beliefs that change is achievable, and that forward

progress is beneficial and worthwhile. In models of critical consciousness, this focus on forward progression is what enables individuals and communities to overcome obstacles.

Examining the foundational tenants of CC in the aforementioned manner helped elucidate psychological constructs that could reasonably underlie or be transferable to the promotion of critical consciousness. Namely, I investigated mindfulness, or a measure of conscious awareness, given its parallels to the critical reflection component of CC. I also studied the relation between CC and growth mindset, a developmental approach to self-improvement, due to its overlaps with critical motivation. Exploring these relationships between CC, mindfulness, and growth mindset is meaningful, as mindfulness and growth mindset are commonly known, validated constructs, and each has a host of corresponding interventions aimed to promote them. Identifying similarities between CC and these constructs, as well as highlighting the degrees to which they co-occur, may explicate opportunities to nest the promotion of CC into other established, targeted interventions. In addition to allowing participants to “capitalize” on the benefits of multiple constructs simultaneously, yielding a higher cumulative benefit to youths and adolescents, such a practice could streamline the delivery of psychosocial interventions for providers.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness refers to the process of bringing awareness to the present moment, including the individual’s thoughts and feelings, features in the environment, and more, and then acknowledging these characteristics without judgment (Melbourne Academic, 2006). The practice of mindfulness is widely acceptable due to the simplicity of its content and the ease of its implementation, and is supported by medical and research communities across the globe. Previous studies have found evidence for the benefits of mindfulness in relaxation and stress reduction, and harnessed

components of mindfulness as its own cognitive-based therapy (Melbourne Academic, 2006). In addition to the increased awareness that marks both critical consciousness and mindfulness, both practices also require individuals to shift and regulate their thought processes, and underlying similarity that may account for the benefits of both.

Growth Mindset. Growth mindset refers to an individual's belief that his or her talents are malleable, such as when skills advance through hard work and practice, when new strategies improve results, or when encouragement and suggestions from others yield developments in accomplishments (Dweck, 2016). Its opposite is a fixed mindset, which refers to an individual's belief that his or her talents are intrinsic and therefore cannot be altered. Research supports that individuals with growth mindsets have higher levels of resilience, motivation, and achievement than their peers with fixed mindsets, across domains spanning from stress management to academic performance (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Empirical studies have identified a number of ways to foster growth mindsets in individuals, such as emphasizing process-oriented learning, modeling of growth mindsets by peers, parents, and teachers, and modifying social responses to successes and failures (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). In addition to the shared underlying assumption that individuals are capable of positive change, growth mindset and critical consciousness are similar in inherently requiring individuals to practice self-assessments of their skills and abilities, which may be a mechanism of positive change in both cases.

Current Directions

The purpose of this paper is to extend prior research by examining indirect programming factors that putatively foster the development of CC in adolescents, guided by the aforementioned trends across previous intervention programs. The primary aims

of this project are two-fold: 1) to investigate the evidence for and/or against the notion that critical consciousness develops only through explicit teaching or direct instruction—an assumption on which previous literature has appeared to rest, though it has never been questioned empirically, and 2) to identify specific but indirect program-level factors that affect the transfer of critical consciousness from an initiative or intervention to its participants. A secondary aim of this study is to identify individual-level characteristics that may lend to a “target population” in which promoting critical consciousness is optimal. To this end, this study also examines participants’ demographics and psychological profiles relative to their reported levels of CC.

With regard to the first primary aim, I hypothesize that this study will show development in participants’ critical consciousness levels, despite being nested in a program that does not include any critical consciousness interventions. In other words, I hypothesize that I will find evidence for indirect pathways in critical consciousness building, based on previous work supporting social and experiential learning. In pursuing the next primary aim of identifying specific programming content, I do not have any predetermined hypotheses as this portion of the study is conducted in an exploratory manner. With regard to the secondary aim of this study, I hypothesize that older participants, or those with more developed cognitive reasoning abilities, will have higher levels of critical consciousness. Another exploratory analysis will be conducted to further address this aim, in hopes of elucidating patterns in critical consciousness levels between genders and across different racial groups. Lastly, I hypothesize that there will be a significant, positive relationship between critical consciousness and both mindfulness and growth mindset, due to similarities underlying each construct.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants and Settings

Data were collected from approximately 250 middle and high school students enrolled in a nonprofit, faith-based, after-school PYD program. To be eligible for this PYD program, students needed to come from under-resourced communities in urban areas across the United States. Program sites are often located in neighborhoods with higher exposure to crimes than the national average. In this study, researchers included data from students at PYD sites in Cleveland, Ohio; Denver, Colorado; Detroit, Michigan; Phoenix, Arizona; San Francisco, California; and St. Louis, Missouri. The largest site was Cleveland with approximately 90 respondents, and the smallest site was San Francisco with approximately 20 respondents. The average site size was approximately 43 respondents and the median site size was approximately 38.5 respondents.

Participants were ethnically diverse, as most self-identified as part of a racial or ethnic minority group. The majority of participants were Black (47%, N=120) or Latinx (34%, N=86), with others reporting that they were of multi-ethnic (8%, N=21), East Asian (7%, N=17), or Caucasian (2%, N=6) descent. The remaining (2%, N=6) students indicated an ethnicity other than one mentioned above. Students' ages ranged from 11 to 18 years, with a mean of 14.97 years (SD=1.93). 66% of participants were young women and only one student did not describe their gender identity as male or female.

The program's publicized aim is to cultivate youth empowerment, with specific attention to fostering success and educational achievement. All youth program participants were considered at-risk, due to living in poverty and for proximity to other environmental risk factors, such as exposure to crime and other adverse experiences. As with most PYD programs, the present program model is diverse. Data for the current study were only drawn from students participating in the after-school (versus residential) programming, in hopes of capturing a more "typical" PYD program experience. All students involved with the organization are told they can anticipate benefiting from long-term support. Such support takes the form of interpersonal resources, including ongoing check-ins with program staff, as well as material resources and financial assistance. This support for participants is designed to follow them throughout college and as they begin their careers, as formal support culminates in job placement assistance.

Programming experiences and opportunities. Similar to most PYD initiatives, programming within this organization is diverse. Some consists of explicit skill building activities for participants, including teaching and enforcing study skills such as time management and note- and test-taking strategies. Other programming focuses on teaching life skills such as budgeting, cooking, and completing basic tasks like laundry. In these cases, skills are often built through approaches that resemble direct instruction: For example, an instructor might model and/or provide a brief overview of a new skill, with the expectation that youths subsequently progress through the steps of guided practice and independent practice until they reach a level of proficiency.

This program, also common among PYD initiatives, places a focus on developing participants' soft skills, such as students' abilities to navigate and resolve peer and other

interpersonal conflicts. These activities may occur in explicit instruction contexts, but are also expected to emerge naturally, and across contexts. For example, adults involved in programming are expected to model healthy relationships, and to encourage and connect with youths in caring ways. This organization does not explicitly identify critical consciousness building as an outcome goal, nor does it include programming directly linked to fostering critical consciousness.

Measures

Student demographics. Student participants self-reported demographics as part of the study's consent process. Response items were a combination of open- and closed-ended questions. In addition to information about their gender, age, and race/ethnicity, students disclosed their time in the PYD program (i.e. time since joining) and frequency and duration of attendance.

Critical consciousness. A composite score of critical consciousness was calculated for each participant, based on his or her responses to the first eight items on the Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS; Diemer et al., 2017). These items compose the *Critical Reflection: Perceived Inequality* subscale. Participants' composite scores were derived from averaging their responses on five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree. No items were reverse scored, and a higher score on each item signified higher levels of critical consciousness. The internal consistency alpha was .96 in the present sample. A full list of items used to measure CC can be viewed in the Appendix.

Programming experiences. Students endorsed whether or not they participated in various programming experiences dichotomously (i.e. responded "yes" or "no" on a

survey). Most activities were characterized vaguely, such as “[those] that helped you set and reach goals,” “[those] that helped you gain new experiences,” and “[those] that helped you improve your study skills”. A full list of items can be viewed in the Appendix.

Growth mindset. Growth mindset was measured using a brief (four-item) scale to which respondents indicated their agreement with various statements on a Likert scale, ranging from 1- strongly disagree, to 5- strongly agree. This measure used the *Incremental Self-Belief* subscale of the Revised Implicit Theories of Intelligence (Self-Theory) Scale (De Castella & Byrne, 2015). Statements included sentiments regarding the malleability of intelligence, as well as a focus on the role of effort in various achievements. All statements followed a similar structure and, as such, none required reverse scoring. Higher average scores in response to growth mindset statements indicated a higher level of growth mindset. The internal consistency alpha was .89 in the present sample. A full list of items can be viewed in the Appendix.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness, sometimes also called mindful attention awareness, was also measured on a brief (four-item) Likert scale. The four items to which students responded were selected from the 15-item Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Students reported how often they feel a certain way, ranging from 1- almost always, to 6- never. All statements followed a similar structure and, as such, none required reverse scoring. Higher average scores in response to mindfulness statements indicated a higher level of mindfulness. The internal consistency alpha was .84 in the present sample. A full list of items can be viewed in the Appendix.

Student interviews. Research clinicians conducted interviews with a random subset of participants (N=59) at each of the program sites included in this study. Student interviews were conducted in a private setting with one or two adult interviewers, and one participant interviewee. Interviews proceeded in a semi-structured manner, with each participant progressing through a template of general themes, while allowing for diversions to talk more about relevant topics of interest.

Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed by a third-party service. Trained research assistants then checked the transcriptions and compared them to original audio files to ensure accuracy prior to qualitative analysis. For the current study, approximately one third of these interviews (n=18) were examined for themes related to critical consciousness, programming experiences, growth mindset, and mindfulness. Interviews were reviewed by the primary author of this study and by a trained undergraduate research assistant. Within each interview, themes of critical consciousness were indicated by mentions of systemic barriers to future plans, as well as by descriptions of what makes a good person, leader, or citizen. Programming experiences were queried directly.

Procedures

Data (student responses) were obtained from an existing dataset gathered as part of a program-wide empowerment evaluation. The evaluation was conducted by a third-party, multi-university-based research team in the United States. The goal of empowerment evaluations is often to guide program members in developing the necessary skills to monitor and evaluate their own performance across domains of operation, following the departure of third-party consultants. Members of the

empowerment evaluation team for the current study traveled to various program sites to interview stakeholders, employees, and youth participants in a variety of settings, as well as to administer and procure quantitative survey data. Researchers administered surveys and conducted interviews on site at the PYD program. High school students were interviewed, and both middle and high school students completed quantitative surveys about their experiences.

Data Analytic Plan

Composite scores for critical consciousness, growth mindset, and mindfulness were calculated by averaging participants' responses to individual items on Likert scales. Statistical analyses including frequency counts and descriptive statistics were conducted in Microsoft Excel, and inferential analyses were conducted in SPSS and RStudio. To address both primary research aims in an initial phase, a multiple linear regression analysis was run to determine which, if any, programming activities predicted critical consciousness levels in participants. The same approach, a linear regression, was used to address the secondary aim and determine whether or not individual differences (such as demographic data, and levels of mindfulness and growth mindset) were significant in predicting critical consciousness.

Following this initial, quantitative analysis phase, qualitative interview analysis occurred. Thus, a sequential, mixed-methods design was employed (Cameron, 2008; Patton, 2002). Interview analysis first used an inductive approach attending to themes broadly related to critical consciousness, such as systemic barriers and social issues noted by student participants. Interview analysis then took a deductive approach, using findings from the quantitative results as codes (i.e. "new experiences"), and searching for

more nuanced explanations or examples of these instances. In efforts to ensure that qualitative coding was reliable and valid, codes were first assigned by researchers independently, and then discussed to confirm agreement or to clarify any areas of disagreement.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Correlates of Critical Consciousness

Following multiple linear regression analysis on programming activities, exposure to new experiences via the PYD program emerged as a significant predictor of critical consciousness ($B=1.03[0.38]$, $t=2.71$, $p=0.00$). This finding answers both primary research aims, providing support for the indirect promotion of critical consciousness, as well as a specific pathway through which such promotion may operate. No other programming experiences in this model emerged as a significant predictor.

In response to the secondary aim of this study, there were no significant differences in critical consciousness by gender ($F[1,239]=1.98$, $p=0.26$) or by program site ($F[5,235] = 0.81$, $p=0.54$). There were significant differences when we examined critical consciousness by race, however: Young Black people reported higher levels of critical consciousness than their peers of any other race. Compared to other races, the standardized mean difference was $d=0.35$. Analyses also revealed significant effects of participants' years spent in the program ($t[202]=2.71$, $p<.01$), and their age in years ($t[202]=2.93$, $p<.01$) on reported levels of critical consciousness. When we adjusted our model to control for age, time in the program did not remain significant. Frequency of attendance, measured in days per week and hours per day, did not predict participants' levels of critical consciousness.

A relationship between growth mindset and critical consciousness was also noted, $F(1,235)=4.33, p=0.04$. There was no significant relation between youths' reported levels of mindful attention awareness and critical consciousness, $F(1,237)=3.46, p=0.06$. These findings can also be viewed in Table 3.1.

Interview Themes

A number of themes emerged throughout participant interviews, which prompted students involved in the program to reflect on their meaningful experiences and their broader worldviews. Following an in-depth review of each interview, participants' responses were coded to identify features of the data that could relate to primary research questions. After the first coding phase, initial themes were generated and then reviewed to ensure relevance to the study. These themes included civic engagement and service, and were apparent in more than half of the transcripts reviewed.

When asked about specific memorable events or activities, many students discussed having the opportunity to try a new activity or being exposed to new ideas as highlights of their PYD program. For example, one student discussed his first out-of-state travel experience (which was associated with the program), and others talked about exposure to new careers via a job series sponsored by the program. Many students also mentioned participation in volunteering and community service activities again in this part of the interviews, and credited those experiences for exposing them to other ways of life. For example, students discussed that volunteering makes the needs of others more visible, thus increasing students' awareness of other people's struggles. In addition to highlighting others' needs, a number of students commented that participating in

community service prompted a reaction in themselves, relating their newfound awareness to a sense of gratitude or responsibility:

- ❖ *“We do service. We go out and help people. And I think it’s one of the things that motivates you to [reach your own] goals, because some people don’t have what other people have.”*
- ❖ *“[This program can be] like a reality check. They tell you that you’re from a place where not a lot of kids get what you have right now. And you work hard, so you need to... become this bigger person”*
- ❖ *“Because of [this PYD program] I do a lot of community service, and... I’ve developed this sense of responsibility”*

Accordingly, students also commonly spoke about the importance of community involvement in being a role model, or a good leader/ good citizen. Many students stated that prior to joining the PYD program, they had minimal familiarity and experience completing community service projects.

Still, some interviews highlighted less encouraging themes, such as the following excerpt taken from a high school student in Phoenix. When asked about descriptors of a good citizen, this student acknowledged the importance of small gestures, such as helping an elderly neighbor take out their trash; however, they also demonstrated disempowerment in their response, perhaps highlighting a limitation of PYD programming in fostering critical consciousness:

“Not everyone can... stand up for people who have been discriminated. Not a lot of people have the power and time to do serious things, like stop discrimination.”

Table 3.1. Regression results indicating correlates of critical consciousness

<u>Item</u>	<u>Est.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>	<u>t val.</u>	<u>p</u>
Participation in the program (in years)	0.139	0.047	2.933	0.004*
Attendance frequency (days per week)	0.008	0.075	0.105	0.917
Attendance frequency (hours per day)	-0.014	0.102	-0.138	0.089
Activities that helped you gain new experiences	1.033	0.381	2.709	0.007*
Growth Mindset	0.304	0.146	2.083	0.038*
Mindful Attention Awareness	-0.132	0.071	-1.861	0.064

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

In sum, earlier research has found robust support that critical consciousness holds promise in fostering positive outcomes in youths and adolescents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, previous work in promoting critical consciousness has not examined whether or not CC can be fostered indirectly, and if so, what those indirect pathways may look like. The purpose of the present study was to address this gap in the literature and provide substantiation for the assumption that critical consciousness can be built through social and experiential learning, in addition to through direct instruction and intervention. The present findings support this assumption, as participants in the PYD program examined in this study reported varying levels of critical consciousness based on programming experiences. Importantly, none of the programming conducted by this organization explicitly aims to build CC in participants; instead, this work demonstrates that CC can be instilled indirectly, and through more broad means of standard PYD programming.

In this program, participants' self-report of meaningful exposure to new experiences emerged as the best quantitative predictor of higher critical consciousness levels. Upon follow-up examination of interview data, a common theme of meaningful new experiences included civic engagement and service activities. It is notable that multiple regression analyses identified exposure to new experiences—but not activities related to volunteerism—as a significant predictor of critical consciousness, while

qualitative responses so prevalently discussed community service activities. This trend highlights an important putative paradigm: That participation in volunteerism or community service is a strong predictor of critical consciousness *when it is a new experience for the participant*. However, non-volunteerism new experiences (such as opportunities to job shadow, and to travel) were also cited by students as impactful opportunities enabled by the PYD program.

Findings that underscore the value of new experiences are supported by previous research. For example, Clark and Seider (2017) conducted a qualitative study of practices within schools that aid in building adolescents' critical curiosity, an assumed precursor to critical consciousness. These authors found that providing exposure to new information (particularly information that related to social justice) and new perspectives through teaching emerged as themes in critical curiosity building, as did providing "real life" examples that were relevant to students. These findings align with those from the current study, as new experiences, as offered by the PYD program, simultaneously encompass new information and perspectives "in real life."

The secondary aim of this study, to identify individual-level factors that correlate with higher CC levels, was also addressed. In this sample, participants' age and tenure in the PYD program was significantly correlated with higher levels of critical consciousness, suggesting that the ongoing services offered by PYD programming may continuously facilitate students' awareness of societal inequities. It also makes sense that older, thus, more cognitively developed participants reported higher levels of critical reflection, as it is an inherently cognitive process.

Students' racial/ethnic identities also predicted their levels of critical consciousness, with Black students reporting higher levels of critical reflection than their non-Black peers. This finding suggests that cultural and life experiences affect societal awareness and engagement, a sentiment echoed in previous literature. A potential explanation for the trend in this study in particular may be that Black individuals are the most blatantly and publicly discriminated against in the United States, and as such, Black youths are forced to face these societal inequities earlier and more head-on than their peers of other ethnicities. However, it is worth noting once more that the entire sample was composed of youths and adolescents from low-income families that live in higher-than-average crime areas. It is reasonable, then, to assume that most members of the sample had previously been exposed to various prejudices and discrimination, among other adverse childhood experiences.

My hypotheses that growth mindset and mindful attention awareness would be linked to critical consciousness received mixed support: Connections between critical reflection and mindfulness were null, but a positive relationship between critical reflection and growth mindset emerged. This finding may be accounted for by the underlying similarities between growth mindset and CC, as they both relate individuals' beliefs (such as about one's ability to improve in a specific domain, or observations about systemic disempowerment) to outcomes (such as work to learn new skills, or actions taken to address societal forces). These findings are also consistent with previous work examining system-justifying beliefs, or those that assume fair practices in the United States school system, in sixth graders: Godfrey, Santos, and Burson (2017) found that system-justifying beliefs predicted worse outcomes, and thus undermined the well-being

of marginalized youths. Growth mindset opposes system-justifying beliefs in that it fosters a greater sense of free will or empowerment, thus making these findings consistent with previous work.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study relates to the condensed nature of self-report measures used to derive quantitative data. While these abbreviated measures allowed for a broader range of data to be collected throughout the large-scale empowerment evaluation, they may have fallen short in capturing all facets of specific constructs of interest, such as in the present study. Growth mindset and mindfulness in particular are broad constructs, consisting of multiple components and manifesting in a variety of ways, which likely affected the inconclusiveness of the present findings.

The scale of critical consciousness, the primary variable of interest in this study, introduced some limitations to the study, as it only queried critical reflection or awareness (i.e. it did not include critical action items, which is the second component of CC inherent in its definition). For example, our findings that time in the PYD program was tied to higher CC may be misleading, as time in the program is linked to more critical awareness/ reflection, but we did not measure social action. This pattern echoes the limitations described by Seider et al. (2017) in their investigation of pedagogical approaches and their relations to critical consciousness.

Moreover, common/ frequent limitations associated with self-report measures are relevant to our study: It is possible that respondents biased their answers in an attempt to appear more desirable to researchers, or otherwise misrepresented themselves. Given the length of the quantitative survey in particular, as well as the fact that it was used with

youths and adolescents, fatigue effects may have altered response patterns. Similarly, data in this study were cross-sectional, inviting another common set of limitations such as decreased control over individual differences and an inability to determine causal relationships. The last notable limitation is that, although data were derived from multiple sites, all programming was nested under one overarching initiative, which may limit the generalizability of these findings.

Implications

Limitations notwithstanding, the influence of critical consciousness on youth and adolescent development is far-reaching. Although the construct stemmed from education, its impact in spheres of culture, politics, sociology, and can be seen through individual measures of attainment, and in community levels of activism and engagement. As such, critical consciousness permeates many aspects of daily life, echoed by the recent surge of research devoted to the topic (Heberle et al., 2020).

Considering the current social and political climate of the United States, the potential role of developing critical consciousness in our youths and adolescents may be more relevant than ever. In one way, the increased visibility of racial and ethnic biases across our society may serve as a natural invitation or catalyst to individuals and small groups of people who are looking to take action and make a difference. As such, identifying programming practices that are linked to increased social awareness and an interest in reducing oppressive and biased systems would be invaluable. However, without empirically supported practices to support and direct these reactions to injustices, it is possible that the increased exposure to discrimination and secondary trauma may

result in learned helplessness or a similarly detrimental outcome. This second possibility underscores the importance of the current research.

By identifying opportune targets and periods of development at which to intervene, as well as meaningful content and instructional methods, the current paper aims to aid in equipping educators, parents, and other community members with the knowledge requisite to effectively instill CC in our youths and adolescents. While the reflective component of CC aids in individual-level critical thinking skills and civic engagement, the active component of CC often leads to visible community changes. As such, the positive results from promoting critical consciousness are notable and numerous. Future programming may be informed to concurrently foster CC in participants without costs to other characteristics of programming.

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APPENDIX A

PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM

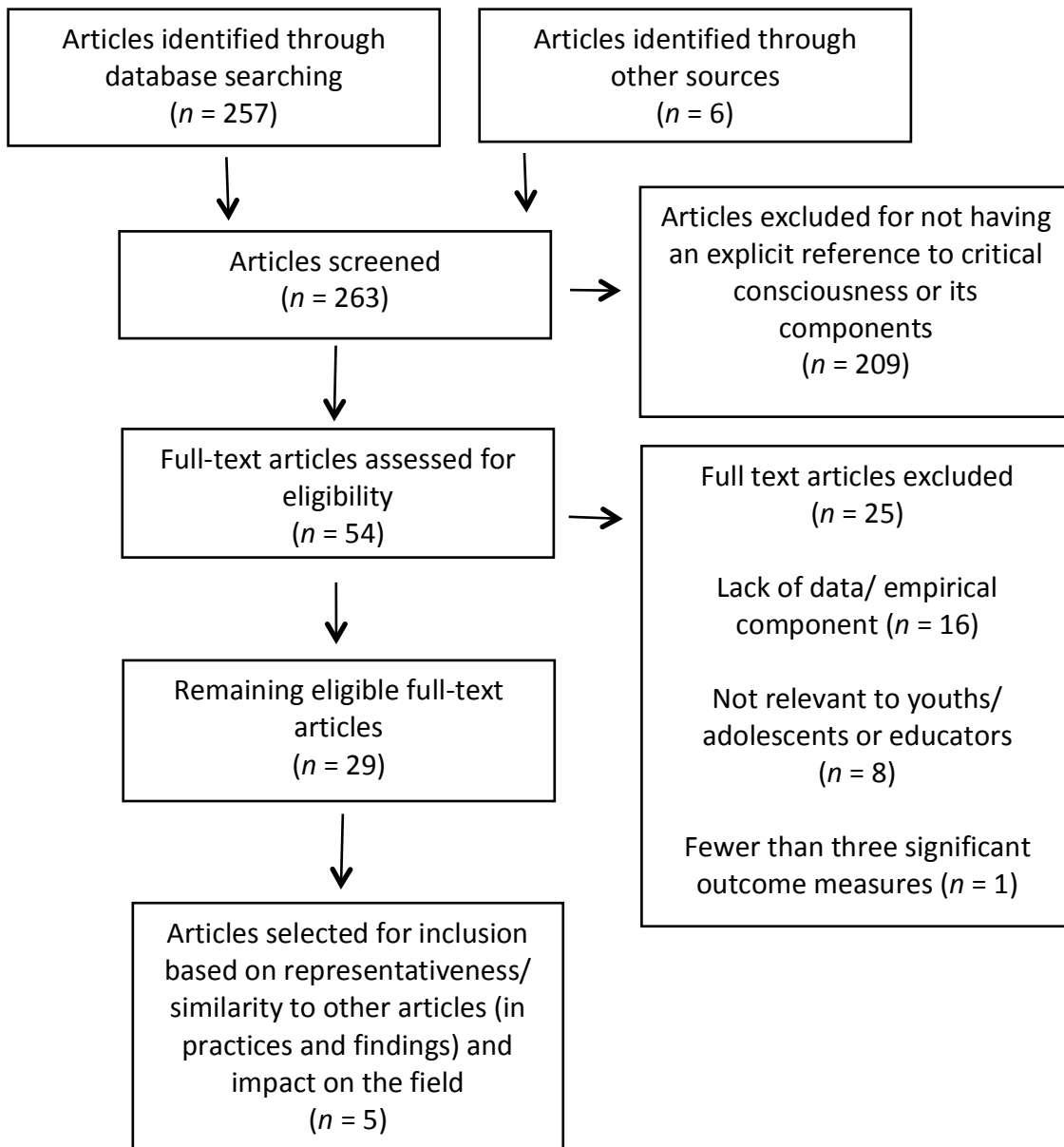


Figure A.1. Progression of the brief literature review for critical consciousness.

APPENDIX B

MEASURES

Critical Consciousness

Students were asked the degree to which they agreed with the following statements:

- Certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get a good high school education.
- Poor children have fewer chances to get a good high school education.
- Certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get good jobs.
- Women have fewer chances to get good jobs.
- Poor people have fewer chances to get good jobs.
- Certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get ahead.
- Women have fewer chances to get ahead.
- Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead.

Programming Experiences

Students were asked whether or not they participated in the following, as part of the PYD organization:

- Any activities that helped you Set and Reach Goals
- Any activities that helped you Deal with Emotionally Difficult Problems
- Any activities that helped you Gain New Experiences

- Any activities that helped you Improve Your Study Skills
- Any activities that helped you Think about your Faith/ Spirituality
- Any activities that helped you Become a Better Leader
- Any activities that encouraged you to Volunteer or do Community Service
- Any activities that helped you Learn How to Live on Your Own
- Any activities that helped you Prepare for College
- Any activities that helped you Become a Better Person
- Any activities that helped you Prepare for a Career

Growth Mindset

Students were asked the degree to which they agreed with the following statements:

- With enough time and effort, I think I could significantly improve my intelligence level.
- I believe I can always improve my intelligence.
- Regardless of my current intelligence level, I have the capacity to change it quite a bit.
- I believe I have the ability to change my basic intelligence level.

Mindful Attention Awareness

Students were asked the frequency of the following mental feelings:

- It seems I am “running on automatic,” without much awareness of what I’m doing.
- I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.

- I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing.
- I find myself doing things without paying attention.

APPENDIX C

YOUTH INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How are you doing in school? Have you learned anything at [this program] that has contributed to your school performance? What are some activities that have helped you improve your study skills?
2. What are your goals for the future? Where do you see yourself in five years? If you could have any job, what do you want to be?
 - a. Why do you want this job?
 - b. Have you been doing anything to get prepared for this type of job?
 - c. What are some barriers that you may face to getting this type of job?
 - d. Are you learning things in [this program] that you think will help you achieve your future goals? Can you tell me more about that?
 - i. Will those skills help you in other areas of life? How?
 - ii. Who are some adults who have made an important positive difference in your life? How did they help you?
3. How about being prepared for college? How do you think you will do in college? What are you most excited about? What are you most worried about? How has [this program] helped you prepare for college?
4. While at [this program], can you tell me about any activities that helped you set and reach your goals?

5. Since you have been at [this program], what is the most memorable experience you have had? What are some of the new experiences you have had as a result of [this program]?
6. What makes a good leader? Have you ever taken on any leadership roles in your school or community? Can you tell me a story about how you tried to make changes in your school or community? What are some ways that you have been a role model to others? How has [this program] helped you become a better leader?
7. How about a better person? How would you describe what it means to be a good person? What can you take from your experiences at [this program] to understand how to be a better person?
8. What makes a good citizen? Have you participated in any activities at [this program] that encouraged you to volunteer or do community service?
9. Would you consider yourself a spiritual person? What are some ways you live out your faith? How has [this program] helped you to grow in your faith life/ spiritual side?
10. How do you think you will do living on your own (during college)? Do you think you will be ready? What are some things you are worried about? While at [this program], have you participated in any activities that helped you learn how to live on your own?