



“They Just Don’t Get That We Matter”: Black Boys’ Critical Consciousness Development During a Health Crisis and Racial Reckoning

Roderick L. Carey¹ · Camila Polanco¹ · Horatio Blackman² ·
Kendell A. Daughtry¹ · Holly R. Abrams¹ · Mark X. Miller¹ · Latrice Marianno³ ·
Sophia Sunshine Vilceus⁴ · Epie Alobwede¹ · William Woelki¹

Accepted: 16 January 2025
© The Author(s) 2025

Abstract

While the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened racial unrest throughout 2020–2021 brought forth unprecedented disruption and trauma to youth and their families globally, these societal occurrences also provided fodder for youth learning and development. We use a theory of critical consciousness development (e.g., critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action) and a racialized lens on social-psychological “mattering” to explore the voiced perspectives of adolescent Black high school boys, who participated in our school-university research partnership called *The Black Boy Mattering Project*. Findings from focus group interviews, gathered over the course of two school years, revealed that as participants navigated the health crisis and widespread racial reckoning, they deepened their critical consciousness of their *marginal mattering*. Marginal mattering reflects a type of perceived insignificance driven by sensing hyper-awareness from others for the alleged negative traits of one’s minoritized (e.g., racial) group. It led to Black boys feeling unappreciated, undervalued, and even feared in society and school environments. Findings show that while maneuvering COVID-19, participants’ encounters with Black Lives Matter via social media and news outlets inspired their *critical reflection* on the racial realities that framed their social and school lives and fueled their marginal mattering. Participants also determined protestors’ capacity to impact social change for the Black community, which inspired them to evaluate their *critical motivation* for making school-level change. While participants did not join street-level protests, they engaged in *critical action* through social media and some school-based endeavors. Implications suggest ways forward for more humanizing school policies and practices.

Keywords African American · Black · Boys · Mattering · COVID-19 · Critical consciousness

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Published online: 06 February 2025

Springer

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruption and trauma to the lives of youth globally, activists launched a racial reckoning in the Spring of 2020 that continued well into 2021. Incited by the shooting death of Ahmaud Arbery by White citizens (February 23, 2020) and police-imposed killings of Breonna Taylor (March 13, 2020) and George Floyd (May 25, 2020), millions (re)united for change under the banner of *Black Lives Matter*. While these killings roused deeper questions about whether Black lives mattered at all, activists also called for local and state leaders to dismantle anti-Black policies and practices (e.g., defund police departments, shutter immigrant detention centers, decriminalize marijuana, and end voter suppression in the U.S. south; Carey et al., 2022b; Lebron, 2023). Activist demands also inspired educators and youth program officers to (re)evaluate and revise policies and practices to better support racially marginalized youth (Baldrige et al., 2024; Curchin et al., 2024).

As stakeholders (re)imagine educational interventions in the wake of this health crisis and racial awakening, scholars have called for more insights into what youth learned about themselves and their world during this tumultuous (Animashaun & Sealey-Ruiz, 2022; Butler-Barnes, 2023; Howard, 2021; Orellana & Ángeles, 2022). Since 2019, our research team has explored how Black adolescent boys perceived their “mattering”—their inferred significance, value, and worth in society and schools—through our school-based research partnership called *The Black Boy Mattering Project*. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and group activities, we foster humanizing contexts for adolescent Black boys to discuss their perceived mattering to those in school, families, and in broader society and imagine their mattering anew. However, when we transitioned our data collection from in-person to virtual due to COVID-19-related school building closures, we also shifted our research foci. We began to explore participants’ mattering as they processed COVID-19 and virtual learning, while witnessing what the *New York Times* reported as the largest social movement in U.S. history: the waves of Black Lives Matter protesting in 2020 (see Buchanan et al., 2020).

In this article, we draw from focus group interview data from a sub-group of Black high school-aged boys, who participated in The Black Boy Mattering Project. Findings revealed that as participants processed COVID-19, societal racial reckoning, and their school’s response to both, they developed “critical consciousness” (Diemer et al., 2016; Freire, 1970; Watts et al., 2011), or the abilities to critique the world and their place within it. While they also deepened understandings about their perceived otherness or “marginal mattering” (Carey, 2019, 2020; Carey et al., 2022a), they imagined ways forward for both societal and school processes.

We discuss our theoretical framework in the following section before reviewing studies on how youth develop critical consciousness based on a variety of influences, including their racialized mattering, and according to each of its three domains—*critical reflection*, *critical motivation*, and *critical action*. After

describing the current study and the methods, we present our findings according to those three critical consciousness domains. We also show how participants' understanding of their marginal mattering in society and school accentuated their critical consciousness development. We then place our findings in discussion with prior studies before concluding with implications for research and educational practice.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Consciousness Development in Youth

Paulo Freire's *conscientização*, or "critical consciousness", is the process of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 35). Freire drew from a lineage of anti-colonialists like Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and Frantz Fanon to devise and deploy critical consciousness as a theoretical guide, organizing principle, and methodology for adult literacy campaigns throughout economically poor areas in Northeast Brazil in the 1950s and 60s. Freire neither conceptualized critical consciousness for youth development nor did he posit a specific theoretical model (Diemer et al., 2016). However, scholars have drawn from Freirean thought to build and advance critical consciousness models for positive adolescent development via the following components: *critical reflection* or *social analysis*, *critical motivation* or *political efficacy* (see Watts et al., 2011), and *critical action* (Diemer et al., 2016, 2021).

Critical reflection is the process of developing skills to "question social arrangements and structures that marginalize groups of people" (Diemer et al., 2016). Critically reflective youth "view social problems and inequalities in systematic terms" (Watts et al., 2011, p. 46) instead of as pattern-less phenomena. During critical reflection, youth amplify their cognizance of linkages between policy, economics, and community conditions. Critical motivation, or "political efficacy" (see Watts et al., 2011), considers youths' perceived capacity to effect change (Diemer et al., 2016). Critically reflective youth may or may not gain critical motivation or efficacy to tackle injustices through critical action. Critical action then refers to individual or collective practices (e.g., voting, organizing, protesting, etc.) to dismantle injustices (Diemer et al., 2016).

Marginal Mattering and Black Boys' Social and School Lives

"Mattering" is an individual's perceived significance to others or to the larger society (Flett, 2018; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). It reflects "feeling valued" for "adding value" to the lives of others (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021). As a relational construct, mattering underscores the centrality of interactions to the self-concept (Elliott et al., 2004). For instance, when others are aware of us, rely on us, and view us as salient, our mattering increases, as does our self-concept. Conversely, "anti-mattering"

(Flett et al., 2022) or not mattering, compels feelings of insignificance or worthlessness that diminish our self-concept.

Carey (2019, 2020) theorized a definition and framework to typify the mattering of Black boys and young men. He did so by coalescing social psychological mattering with the racialized realities facing Black boys and men and the energy and imagery of Black Lives Matter (see Garza, 2016; Lebron, 2023). Emerging from Carey's (2019) analysis included *marginal mattering*. This condition for Black boys and young men reflects a type of "minimal recognition that implies their insignificance, as signaled by individuals (e.g., peers, educators, the general public) and institutions (e.g., schools) around them" (Carey, 2019, p. 376).

Marginal mattering is shaped by "marginalization" (Schlossberg, 1989) or "anti-mattering" (Flett, 2018; Flett et al., 2022), notions which reflect individuals' felt insignificance. Incorporating a racialized lens on mattering widens possibilities for understanding the experiences of Black boys. One's perceived anti-mattering may emerge from feeling ignored, overlooked, or irrelevant (Flett, 2018). Like anti-mattering, marginal mattering brings about feelings that are situated opposite to mattering, like worthlessness. However, feelings of marginal mattering do not solely emerge from being ignored, for instance. Marginal mattering comprises sensing hyper-attention or hyper-awareness from others for perceived negative traits and unacceptability. It is accompanied by forms of hyper-scrutiny which lead to feeling unappreciated, undervalued, and even feared. These complex feelings surface more often for people of Color—particularly Black boys and men—in contexts like schools where they are racially stereotyped and marginalized. Social actors may push or keep Black lives at the margins—in other words, force them to *matter* at the social margins—as a control mechanism or as an expression of disdain. Said otherwise, marginal mattering emerges from navigating anti-Black institutions and practices that see or are aware of Black lives but keep them casted aside as "others" in everlasting unease (Carey, 2020). It is this marginal mattering—and the anti-Black policies and practices that covertly justify it (see Carey et al., 2022b; Lebron, 2023)—that called protestors to social media and the street to exclaim *Black Lives Matter!*

Educators create the conditions for marginal mattering through practices that reify Black boys' unacceptability. Partly due to stereotypical portrayals in popular culture, educators may view Black boys as threatening and perceive them as older and more devious than they are (Brown, 2018; Bryan, 2020; Davis, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015). Black boys in-turn perceive marginal mattering through practices that maintain their subjugation (see Carey et al., 2022a) like the systemic devaluing of their culture (Carey et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2022), disproportional disciplining (Bryan et al., 2023; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Marsh & Walker, 2022), hyper-surveillance (Garcia et al., 2022; Jenkins & Warren, 2024; Rios, 2011), and intellectual exclusion (Hotchkins, 2016; Jett, 2022).

Literature Review

We framed our inquiry into Black boys' development during COVID-19 and racial unrest by linking critical consciousness with marginal mattering. What follows is

research on how adolescents of color formulate each facet of critical consciousness (i.e., *critical reflection*, *critical motivation*, and *critical action*) given interpersonal connections, media messaging, and influences in educational contexts. We also address how racialized mattering may factor into youths' critical consciousness development before describing the current study.

Critical Consciousness in Adolescent Youth

Adolescence is ideal for critical consciousness development, since they gain the cognitive skills required to grasp abstract concepts like oppression and justice (Seider et al., 2023). The late spring and early summer of 2020 (i.e., Freedom Summer) was a fertile context for adolescents' critical consciousness development. Scholars responded to the moment by exploring the critical consciousness development of adolescents and emerging adults during COVID-19 (Maker Castro et al., 2022; Pinedo et al., 2024; Weidman et al., 2024; Wray-Lake et al., 2023), with a growing number doing so mindful of coinciding racial uprisings (see Fine et al., 2021; Mathews, 2023; Quiles et al., 2023; Wilf et al., 2022).

Fine and colleagues (2021) conducted critical Youth Participatory Action Research with mostly immigrant adolescents. They found that students' critical consciousness, which emerged from culturally responsive and sustaining practices in school and beyond, shaped their interest in Black Lives Matter. Wilf and colleagues (2022) analyzed interview data and Twitter posts (now called X) with racially and ethnically diverse immigrant-origin young people (ages 18–23). They found social media use helped youth express their critical consciousness through online civic engagement. Findings like these are promising for what will continue to emerge in this line of inquiry. However, most current studies on youth critical consciousness during COVID-19 and racial reckoning were conducted with college students or emerging adults, not school-aged adolescents. Adolescents, who attended virtual school, shared households with their families, and remained under familial care, had less autonomy than college students to discuss and express critical consciousness during protests, with peers in person, and even with research teams due to COVID-19 social distancing mandates. So, in the absence of extensive literature on these topics, we review studies on relational and educational experiences that shape adolescents' critical reflection, motivation, and action (e.g., critical consciousness development).

Critical Reflection Development in Adolescents

A key step in gaining critical consciousness is critical reflection—analyzing and reflecting on social problems (Diemer et al., 2016). Research has shown that adolescents gain critical reflection skills through dialoguing with significant individuals in their lives (Heberle, 2020). For instance, adolescents become critically reflective when they discuss shared experiences with social inequalities and racial injustice with peers (Aviles & Grigalunas, 2018; Gómez & Cammarota, 2022; Hope et al., 2020; Kennedy et al., 2020). Family members also bolster adolescents' ability to

critically reflect on racial discrimination through ethnic and racial socialization and discussions at home (Butler-Barnes, 2023; Mathews, 2023). Moreover, families are key sources for providing adolescents not only with guidance to understand systemic injustice but also skills for how to navigate it (Bañales et al., 2021; Briggs et al., 2023; Glover et al., 2022).

Educators and youth development workers augment marginalized youths' critical reflection skills by centering youths' experiences within their practices (Bajaj et al., 2017; Carey et al., 2021; Gutstein, 2012; Madkins & McKinney de Royston, 2019). In their study of a mentoring program, Farinde-Wu et al. (2021) revealed how leaders leveraged race and gender discourses to connect Black girls' individual challenges to systemic problems. Using a "woke pedagogy" that encouraged sociopolitical discussions and experiential reflections, mentor leaders helped girls identify educational barriers like racially biased discipline practices.

In addition, exposure to media (e.g., social media, music, and news), public art, and opportunities for artmaking also spurs adolescents' critical reflection (Abdul-Adil, 2014; Gipson, 2015). At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, most youth were confined to their homes. Fortunately, social media outlets, like Instagram and Twitter (now called X) heightened their critical reflection by providing a gateway to firsthand accounts of local, national, and global inequalities (Gayle Gabriel et al., 2021; Wilf et al., 2022).

Critical Motivation Development in Adolescents

Families, peers, and teachers influence critical motivation, or youths' beliefs that they can impact social change (Kennedy et al., 2020; Uriostegui et al., 2021). In studies on adolescents' critical motivation, scholars find family communication (i.e., discussing discrimination and inequities) salient for inspiring youth to fight for their beliefs (Glover et al., 2022; Marchand et al., 2019). In addition to families, educators spark adolescents' critical motivation through their classroom practices.

Educators foster students' critical motivation when they teach them the history of oppressive forces, provide opportunities for youth to plan civic engagements, and stress the power of organizing and voting to change their communities (Carey et al., 2021; Duncan, 2022; Madkins & McKinney de Royston, 2019; Seider et al., 2017). For instance, Seider et al. (2017) found that Black and Latinx students, who attended schools that created civic engagement opportunities, felt inspired to make social change. Madkins and McKinney de Royston (2019) showed that when science teachers deployed forms of "political clarity"—or attended to power and oppression in students' lives—they encouraged students to challenge status quo arrangements through their dispositions and engagement in science learning. Gutstein (2012), who did not specifically focus on critical motivation, showed that when educators taught about social inequality within mathematics lessons and centered students' racial, cultural, and gender identities in classroom activities, youth were inspired to create a difference in their communities.

Adolescents are also more likely to be critically motivated if they have a personal connection with social injustices via witnessing or experiencing discrimination

(Hope et al., 2020). Such personal experiences could compel them to join programs that combat oppressive forces in their communities (Akiva et al., 2017; Tyler et al., 2020; Weidman et al., 2024). Additionally, when youth fight for important causes, peer connections inspire critical motivation. By connecting with peers through social media (e.g., Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, etc.), youth can garner support from individuals with similar experiences and beliefs, which could propel them to advocate for change (Wilf et al., 2022).

Critical Action Engagement for Adolescents

An adolescent's willingness to fight for their beliefs through critical action is influenced by the support and guidance they receive from others (Akiva et al., 2017). Adults foster youths' critical action by equipping them with resources like community partnerships and leadership opportunities (Akiva et al., 2017). Adults can also support youth as they deal with heightened injustice by engaging in social justice advocacy together (Das et al., 2022; Glover et al., 2022; Heberle et al., 2020). Peer networks also spark youths' critical action. When youth inspire their peers to join local, national, or global social change projects, they promote a sense of community, rich with critical action opportunities (Kennedy et al., 2020; Tyler et al., 2020).

While adolescents' action strategies vary, due to their developmental stage and access to resources, youth typically engage in critical action through protesting, voting, or posting on social media (Tyler et al., 2020). Historically marginalized youth also academically over-perform as a type of critical action (Seider et al., 2020). Through succeeding academically, youth combat negative beliefs about their community and increase their likelihood for obtaining career opportunities to serve their communities (Uriostegui et al., 2021). In addition, initiating critical action benefits adolescents' well-being and augments their sense of purpose (Anyiwo et al., 2020; Maker Castro et al., 2022), a reality that has led scholars to call for new understandings of what counts as action and for stakeholders to better centralize critical action in schools and youth programming (Carey et al., 2021; Diemer et al., 2021; Quiles et al., 2023; Seider et al., 2023).

Linking Mattering and Critical Consciousness

Adolescents define their self-concept in part by perceiving their value and significance to others (Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Tucker et al., 2010). As adolescents awaken to the world and their place within it by developing critical consciousness, they may concurrently learn about oppressive social forces that shape their perceived marginal mattering. Hence critical consciousness development could also have implications for adolescents' mattering, and the current study seeks to explore these phenomena in tandem.

As such, our study fills gaps in the literature on critical consciousness and mattering by applying these two constructs to youth development in ways not previously done. Also, while ample studies investigate adolescents' critical consciousness (see Heberle et al., 2020 for a review), ours contributes to the growing literature base

on the simultaneous impacts of COVID-19, racial reckoning, and virtual learning on youth development (Fine et al., 2021; Mathews, 2023; Quiles et al., 2023; Wilf et al., 2022). We also provide a unique perspective by uplifting the voiced insights from adolescent youth, which we gathered in real-time, instead of through retrospective accounts from adults.

The Current Study

Our study draws from The Black Boy Mattering Project (BBMP), a research and school-university partnership between County High School (pseudonym) and a Research 1 University (see Carey et al., 2022a). The BBMP provides Black boys and young men opportunities to discuss the ways their social and academic experiences shape their mattering to others and to society at large. The BBMP's activities are guided by mattering frameworks (Carey, 2019, 2020; Elliot et al., 2004), and consist of semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, field trips, and group activities (e.g., artmaking).

The BBMP was established in 2019 at County High School, a racially and ethnically diverse comprehensive high school, which served over 1200 students. In Table 1, we report County High School's student body demographics for the 2020 school year. County High School resided in a suburban community. Yet, County was "urban characteristic" (Milner, 2012) given that its racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity was like urban schools in larger, densely populated cities. During the 2019–2020 school year, 17 boys joined The BBMP. This study presents the perspectives of six of these 17, who expressed interest in continuing

Table 1 Characteristics of county high school's student body

Race and Ethnicity	Percentage
Black	40
White	32
Latinx/Hispanic	21
Asian	4
Two or more races	3
<i>Additional demographics</i>	
Students in low-income households	38
Students with disabilities	25
All other students	22
Students of emerging bilingual status	10
Students who experience homelessness	4
Students who are in foster care	1
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	55
Female	45

Percentages represent data collected at the end of the 2020–2021 school year, and enrollment was comprised of 1299 students

their engagement through participation in virtual focus groups after their school building closed due to COVID-19. Details about these six—John, Lewis, Mac, Sean, Steven, and Tei (their chosen pseudonyms)—appear in Table 2.

Data collection began at County High in 2019. We faced COVID-19 related pauses in field work in March of 2020, and throughout the fall of 2021. From March 2020, participants learned at home for the remainder of the school year, which caused us to shift data collection to a virtual format. Here we examine data from five focus groups conducted in the late Spring and Summer of 2020 and Spring of 2021.

Data for this study came out of an unprecedented moment. On May 30, 2020, protestors gathered in the city, near most participants' homes, to engage in a dialogue with police and civil officials. What began as peaceful, organized marches in the morning evolved into nighttime rioting that left dozens of storefronts damaged and looted. Similar uprisings continued from late-May through mid-June of 2020 across the world. The impact of these demonstrations rippled well into 2021 and did not go unnoticed by youth. Hence, our study seeks to answer the following question: How did the exposure to heightened racial unrest and a health crisis spur the critical consciousness of adolescent Black boys at one high school?

Methods

Study Procedures and Recruitment

Upon securing university IRB and school district permission in the Fall of 2019, Carey met with County High School's administrative team to elicit support to conduct research. After approval, school leadership appointed a teacher to support The BBMP. Our teacher leader, a White middle-aged woman named Mrs. Kent (pseudonym), worked as a health and physical education teacher, AVID instructor, and senior class advisor at County for over a decade and had a stellar reputation for forming meaningful relationships with students. She helped recruit students who self-identified as either a boy (aged 18 and under) or young man (over 18, yet still in high school), and as Black or African American. To recruit, the teacher leader posted project flyers up in the school and used word of mouth to gauge student interest. She also provided permission forms to students, collected signed permission and assent forms, and helped us arrange interviews.

During COVID-19, County students attended synchronous classes through Zoom, an online video conferencing tool. Some courses met asynchronously. From March to May of 2020, we had minimal contact with the participants (e.g., we texted them to check in). After we re-engaged Mrs. Kent, we shifted our in-person project to a virtual format. She then emailed participants to coordinate Zoom focus group interviews, which began in June 2020. Of the 17 initial participants in The BBMP, six contacted us to express an interest in continuing their participation virtually. In all, we conducted five 45–60-min virtual focus groups: one in June of 2020, February of 2021, and March of 2021, and two in May of 2021.

Table 2 Participants' Personal and Academic Characteristics

Participants (pseudonyms)	Race/Ethnicity	Grade during 2019–2020 school year	Focus group involvement	Individuals in household	Extracurricular activities
John	African American	Junior	One in spring 2020, four in spring 2021	Mother, father, and three brothers	Football
Lewis	African American	Junior	One in spring 2020, four in spring 2021	Mother and father	Basketball, track, and football
Mac	African American	Senior	One in spring 2020	Stepmother, father, and three brothers	Football and track
Sean	African American	Junior	Three in spring 2021	Mother, father, sister, and two brothers	Basketball and debate club
Steven	Biracial (African American and White)	Sophomore	Two in spring 2021	Father, aunt, three uncles, and two cousins	Football
Tei	African American	Junior	One in spring 2020	Two aunts	Basketball

Data Sources and Analysis

We based our initial focus group interview protocols on the construct of mattering. However, like other researchers (see Fine et al., 2021), we shifted our study aims to create space for youth to process the health crisis and racial reckoning unfolding around them. We slightly revised our protocols to explore not just participants' sense of societal and school mattering, but also what they were learning from the current moment, through the vantage of critical consciousness development. For example, mattering questions included those like "how do you feel like you matter in school?" And "how do your teachers make you feel like you matter?"

Focus group questions like "how do you feel you matter as a Black boy or young man in society?" took on new meaning during the Spring of 2020 as participants witnessed waves of anti-Black violence and the Summer 2020 protesting, rioting, and looting. Within this context, we also asked questions directly linked with their critical consciousness development like, "do you feel more motivated to take action against things as a result of what happened this summer or not so much?" Or "what do you think the response would be if you guys started posting and talking about Black Lives Matter around your school?" Responses to questions like these provided insights into participants' critical consciousness development. Four researchers moderated the focus group interviews, which we recorded on Zoom and had professionally transcribed using Ubiquis On Demand. We compensated participants with \$25 Visa gift cards, which we mailed to their homes at the completion of each focus group.

After cleaning the transcripts, we coded them with Dedoose software. Prior to coding, we established interrater reliability (see Carey et al., 2022a for details). Initial a priori codes consisted of concepts that aligned with mattering (Carey, 2019, 2020; Elliott et al., 2004; Flett, 2018) and factors related to school, community, family, and other areas of interest for the larger study. Throughout the coding process, BBMP researchers met to discuss and collaborate on identifying the emerging patterns within the data.

Here, we explored coded excerpts that spoke to the three elements of the critical consciousness framework: critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action. We used over 60 codes to analyze participants' voiced perspectives including the following: "Black Lives Matter," "perspectives on protests," "perspectives on rioting or looting," "mattering in school," and "impact of COVID-19." We assessed excerpts assigned to these codes and examined places where they overlapped with other excerpts, like those coded with "importance," "marginal mattering," "perceived mattering," "perspective on teachers," and "social media." We grouped overlapping coded excerpts into themes that revealed participants' marginal mattering and critical consciousness development in relation to both social processes and school practices.

Positionality

The Black Boy Mattering Project is not only a research program, but also a humanizing context (see del Carmen Salazar, 2013) for Black boys to express their mattering and imagine it more comprehensively. To do this work well, our research team

mined our positionalities in relationship to the participants and to the topic under study (see Carey et al., 2024).

Though research personnel changed between 2019 and 2021, for most of the time our team was comprised of three Black men (two African American and the other, Black Caribbean American), one Afro–Latinx woman of Dominican origin, and one White American woman. The remaining authors of this article gathered data face-to-face with The BBMP participants between 2021 and 2024, supported data analysis, and co-authored sections of this article. Many of us shared racial affinity with participants, yet our diverging lived experiences made it so that excavating assumptions and building “relational trust” (see Brooms, 2021; Howard, 2021) were key to avoiding exploitative practices while eliciting deep insights from participants.

As researchers tied to a large, predominantly White, Research 1 university, we were susceptible to colonialist practices that misrepresent marginalized voices at best and exploit vulnerable communities at worst (see Milner, 2007; Patel, 2015). To resist such practices, we mirrored to participants what we studied: relational mattering. Through constant check-ins, centering participants’ needs, and modeling our own vulnerability throughout COVID-19 and racial unrest, we forged the type of relationships we hope other stakeholders will build with Black boys and other racialized groups to ensure they know they matter.

Findings

Our findings reflect each of the three domains of critical consciousness: critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action. In each section, we show how participants’ marginal mattering highlighted their critical consciousness development along the lines of their understandings of broader social and school processes.

Critical Reflection of Marginal Mattering: Interpreting Imagery and Messaging

While maneuvering COVID-19, participants’ immersive encounters with Black Lives Matter imagery and messaging via social media and news outlets inspired their critical reflection on the realities framing Black life in the U.S. In addition, participants revealed critical reflections on how Black students marginally mattered in school.

Critical Reflection of Societal Processes

Imagery and messaging from television and video games provoked participants’ critical reflection on the marginal mattering of Black life. A tribute to Black victims of police-inflicted killings and other racist violence appeared during the 20th annual Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards show on June 28, 2020. In addition to televised messages, supports for causes elevated by protesters even reached participants’ video game splash screens (i.e., postings that appear while the game loads) that read a message supporting Black Lives Matter. Seeing these messages drew participants deeper into critical reflection. John noted,

Like even it's gotten so bad... I was watching the BET Awards last night and every artist was basically like speaking out and showing like we matter and speaking up on every situation and on every person that passed away due to police brutality. But even like the video games we play are like including Black Lives Matter on their [splash screens]. I felt like it really shows even the young audience like us and the older, everyone really, how police brutality and police really don't really care about minorities or Black lives at all.

Finding these messages on platforms geared toward younger audiences (e.g., BET awards and video games), compelled John to interpret the severity of the moment, how widespread racial violence was, and the lengths corporations were going to spread awareness. Similarly, Tei noted, "It just made me realize like it's very serious like, racism really is there. It's like, it's real, like it could happen to anybody, any of us, don't matter how old you is. It's not just cops. It's everybody." By moving from seeing anti-Black violence as just police-based phenomena to power upheld by wider, systemic forces and wielded by *everybody*, Tei shifted away from individualistic- to systemic-based rationales for the marginal mattering he saw and experienced. Seen here, accounts from John and Tei show how widespread messaging fostered participants' critical reflection on the systematic marginalizing and devaluing of Black lives.

Street-level responses to anti-Black killings, which participants saw via social media posts and other media outlets, also fostered critical reflection into why Black individuals harbor such pervasive unease. John noted, "The protesting impacted me a lot, because it shows how much we really gotta think about what we do every day. It shows how much Black lives really don't matter in our society like at all." For John, the protesting showed how social forces impose marginal mattering in ways that spur racialized anxiety and uncertainty.

After seeing the protest in a nearby city through social media posts, John critically reflected, with the support of his father, on what he referenced as "evil" systemic oppressions at the juncture of racism, poverty, and COVID-19. Witnessing the protesting, looting, and rioting spurred John to note the following:

My dad, he gave me like more of an insight on things in [the city]. He went to [the city] and nobody had a mask on, nobody really cared. He was like basically 'people in the hood go through life surviving every day. Like what's some virus gonna do? Like they're surviving every day. They're not worried about a virus; they're worried about when their next meal's gonna be...' I was like 'dang, that's evil and it's true.'

While in some ways, John minimized COVID-19's severity on Black urban communities, he did so as a rhetorical mechanism to argue for what he believed was a far greater threat: the racial and economic stratification that keeps Black people in the "hood" hungry.

Critical Reflection on School

Like broader social processes, participants critically reflected on a school culture that reified Black boys' marginal mattering. Participants described positive relationships with some teachers. But most believed that teachers generally cared more about the social and academic well-being of their non-Black peers than Black boys. Lewis reflected,

The teachers seem to care more about other races than just Black boys... if I was like – if my race was to do something wrong or whatever, they wouldn't care too much about it. Like they would look at it as, 'okay, that's regular for a Black man to do that.' But if a different race was to do it, they would care more and try to teach them the right way...

Some educators stereotyped Black boys as socially unacceptable and presumably deviant. Some even withheld care by assuming that deviance was "regular." In doing so, they reified boys' marginal mattering. These school encounters offered glimpses into why participants believed teachers were ambivalent toward addressing the social uprisings, let alone reckoning with forms of anti-Black racism that students experience systemically and interpersonally.

Participants said just their African American Studies teacher, along with a few other teachers and coaches, even discussed the protesting. Sean noted, "No one really said nothing to me...I think teachers try to stay out of the whole political thing unless they're really close with certain students." Unfortunately, weak relational links existed between many Black students and the mostly White faculty, leaving discussions on race off the table. In the absence of willing teachers or classroom cultures that bolstered Black students' mattering, participants made meaning of heightened racial unrest without the benefit of class discussions.

Participants' marginal mattering also emerged from actions—or rather, inactions—of school administrators. Overall, administrators showed no sympathy or concern for the deaths of those like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and made no mention of the resulting social unrest. In unpacking school office and home communication, Lewis and Sean discussed the following:

Sean: Black Lives Matter? No, they didn't bring it up at all...

Lewis: They didn't say anything about George Floyd or Breonna Taylor. They didn't have anything to say about it.

Sean: Nope.

Lewis: Not over the announcements. I mean, I heard a few teachers talk about it... But as a whole school, no. They didn't bring anything up about it.

Though this administrative passivity frustrated participants, it did not surprise them. They posed numerous examples (e.g., negative interactions, tension between Black boys and faculty) that induced their perceived marginal mattering prior to COVID-19 and racial uprisings. The lack of administrative response to the racial strife cemented the boys' brewing perceived unimportance and further frayed the already tenuous relations between Black students and their school.

Critical Motivation through Community Political Efficacy: Unearthing Tactical Impacts

None of the participants engaged in Black Lives Matter street protests. This was partly due to risks of contracting COVID-19 and infecting household members. Steven lived with an especially vulnerable family member, making him extra cautious of leaving his house. He noted, “I have to make sure that I’m not getting anything because my aunt who lives with me, she has lupus. So, she’s like high risk of getting sick. Yeah, I feel like I have to be more careful with everything for her.” Yet, images on social media and news outlets spurred them to interpret the efficacy of protesters’ tactics. In doing so, participants determined the capacity, or critical motivation, of protesters to impact social change for the Black community. Locally, however, participants built on the momentum of the racial reckoning by formulating critical motivation to advocate for school change.

Critical Motivation for Making Change in Society

Participants disagreed on the tactical efficacy of certain forms of civil disobedience for calling attention to the causes supported by Black Lives Matter (i.e., peaceful protests vs. rioting, burning and/or looting). For instance, Lewis, whose father helped him process the incidents, supported protesting but felt the rioting and looting was counterproductive. He noted,

Like my dad broke it down... I think it got out of proportion.... Like at first it was a protest, and they wasn’t doing all that rioting. And then when rioting started, if y’all think about it, y’all talking about *Black Lives Matter* but y’all rioting and stealing from Black businesses. Y’all making y’all community worse instead of like trying to lift it up. You making it worse by burning down buildings, and stealing, and breaking into stuff; you’re destroying your community instead of trying to fix your community.

In burning and looting stores in the Black community, especially Black owned ones, protesters responded in ways Lewis deemed contradictory. Lewis interpreted the political efficacy of these forms of social disobedience by critiquing the motivation of social actors. For Lewis, the better tactic was for Black people to “fix” and uplift the community instead of burning it down.

Tei’s and John’s beliefs differed from Lewis. Watching individuals burn down community stores pained Tei, especially given the systemic challenges Black entrepreneurs face when opening and sustaining businesses. He did, however, believe the rioting elicited attention in ways peaceful protesting did not. Tei noted, “Peaceful protest? It can work. But rioting and stuff is gonna make people look. People gonna see; people gonna pay attention now.” Moreover, Tei indicated the media attention the rioting drew in provided community stakeholders a platform to spread their often-ignored messages. Tei continued, “When they do record them burning buildings down—the Black people get on the news. They get to talk and speak their mind. And a lot of people see it, and they probably start understanding what’s happening and why they’re doing it.” John agreed with Tei on this point.

John, whose parents helped him work through what he saw and experienced from social media posts of the protests, offered historical antecedents to underscore his support for the riots that spurred the arrest of George Floyd's murderer. He noted,

It had to happen. First of all, for me, my dad, and mom, we talk about it a lot. On social media, I see things that I don't quite understand, so I try to get another opinion from my parents because I know that they care about this stuff just as much as I do. So, I was thinking we've been protesting peacefully since Malcolm X, since Martin Luther King. For a hundred years, we've been protesting peacefully, doing what we need to do, trying to show the best of us. And they still don't get it – *they just don't get that we matter*.

John compared the effectiveness of the “civil and peaceful” tactics used to agitate for civil rights in the past with activists' present strategies. His expanding critical consciousness emerged because of reading present day occurrences, while attuned to historical antecedents. In a focus-group exchange, participants discussed activists' conflicting tactics.

Lewis: They was filming the protest too, they got a guy on the news and spoke they mind during a protest, they didn't have to riot. They chose to do that, it's dumb.

John: Rioting is the only way they will understand. Obviously protesting's not working. We been protesting for years, since my dad was a kid, since his mom was a kid —

Tei: Rioting made a lot of stuff happen though –

John: It took rioting to get the cop that killed George Floyd. Not even locked up, to get arrested, to get a actual charge. That's just from rioting.

Lewis: I'm just saying what took place, how it took a bad turn, how quick it happened.

John: True, but it had to, in my opinion.

Lewis: Yeah, like how it all took place was just like – I don't think it's going to work.

Here, participants interpreted the critical motivation of Black people and allies for the protesting, rioting, and looting that transpired in the aftermath of recent anti-Black killings. Participants were aware of the efficacy of street-level agitation in prior Black freedom struggles. By critically reflecting on these movements and formulating evidenced-based interpretations of stakeholder's capacity to effect social change through certain tactics, participants cultivated their critical consciousness, which they applied when determining pathways to agitate for school change.

Critical Motivation to Agitate for School Change

Societal movements for Black lives inspired participants to assess what needed to happen for school-based change. Participants imagined how to compel their educators to implement changes to ensure that Black students perceived their mattering in the wake of racial unrest and COVID-19. In noting, “I think they should hop on the

wave,” Tei revealed his belief that the administration should harness the energy of the extant moment to address Black students’ needs. If the administration would not listen, students should organize an activist response. Tei noted,

‘Cause a majority of our school is Black. We own that school. It’s all us; we everywhere! But if they don’t do that, we gonna have to start our own protest. We need – we gonna have to talk, we’re gonna have to make them listen at our school.

When organized, the sheer number of Black students imbued them with power to make administrators listen to Black students’ needs. In determining action steps, Tei called for a “walkout”, which students organized in ninth grade for gun laws in the wake of rampant school shootings. Tei noted, “we can walk out again. Walk out and protest, we can bring our little posters and stuff and make them—yeah. Or we can all agree not to come to school. We all don’t come until they listen.” Tei’s vision was to persuade the administration to simply “listen” more closely to Black students’ needs. His remarks inspired participants to imagine other actions. For instance, John noted, “we need to do something bigger than what we’re doing now, which is nothing. Even little changes, like a banner here or there.”

In addition to listening to Black students, participants imagined a Black racial affinity and advocacy organization. They were inspired by a newly formed LGBT-QIAP+ student group. Tei noted, “The LGBTQ group took time. That had to build up; it was two, three years for them to start allowing that. So, it’s gonna take time for them to realize they actually gotta do that for us.” Policy changes came about gradually for marginalized students. While students organized to advocate for this group, it was ultimately the administrators that, as Tei said, “actually gotta do that for us.” The administration had to permit the group’s creation. Regardless of how much power was imbued in the number of Black students, Tei knew that not only would it take years to actualize this vision, but also without administrative buy-in, their movement would amount to little.

Critical Action in Society and School

While participants did not participate in street-level protests, they found ways to engage in critical action through social media and some school-based engagement.

Critical Action in Society

Sean noted, “I engaged with Black Lives Matter on the blackout day. Everybody was posting just a black screen on Instagram, because of the Black Lives Matter.” Like Steven also noted, John said, “I have to worry about my family and COVID.” So, while he was not involved in any street protests, he said that he “posted a couple things for awareness for different people getting lynched, people being killed by police. I always try to post—at least if I see it, I post it.”

John was part Japanese and felt motivated to spread social media posts on both anti-Black and anti-Asian brutality. According to the Stop AAPI Hate

reporting center (Saw et al., 2021), between March 2020 and February 2021, individuals reported 3,795 hate incidents, including verbal harassment, shunning, physical assaults, racist jokes, and civil rights violations (see also Gover et al., 2020). John noted, “I try to just do little things. I try to spread awareness about police brutality, but also like a lot of Asian brutality happening. It’s just out of control and I don’t understand why.” Some attributed waves of anti-Asian sentiment to racist claims that Asian Americans were responsible for COVID-19. Others noted such sentiments were brewing before COVID-19, and the media only increased attention on anti-Asian violence after the March 16, 2021 shooting deaths of eight individuals in Atlanta, Georgia nail spas, six of whom were Asian women. John believed it essential to engage in social media activism for Black lives and Asian lives, a group who also faced widespread ill-treatment.

Critical Action in School

Participants’ critical social analysis inspired actions to make society and school better for the Black community. They engaged in micro-level classroom actions, but questioned if their school would respond to a collective movement for macro-level changes.

Micro-Level School Critical Action Lewis focused on racism for his *Senior Project*, a yearlong, multi-phased inquiry that comprises a research paper, public presentation, and defense to faculty. Described by the school district as “the culmination of each student’s academic experiences,” this project, which the district mandates for graduation, combines students’ interests and passions into a single academic exercise.

Given its gravity, students carefully chose their topic. Lewis, chose *racism* because, as he said, “it’s something big that’s going on in the world right now...And it needed to be talked about and clarified.” Prior to his Senior Project, Lewis spent nearly a year steeped in imagery, debates, and discussions with The BBMP members on anti-Black racism and racial justice. These shared interactions inspired him to use his senior project to crystallize his critical notions and publicly express them. In describing his project, Lewis recounted,

I used discrimination, Civil Rights, and the Black Lives Matter movement, and I just defined them in my own words. But I also used information from the internet about the movements, when they started, what they’re for, and why they started...The final thing that I did on my project was give my personal opinion about everything that I thought would need to change basically for racism to go away, which is never gonna go away, but I put in what needed to be done for racism to be changed for good.

We urged Lewis to describe his arguments. He discussed how to redress racial tensions.

I said I feel as though racism will never be stopped until we put a stop to it ourselves... It starts with us and our children as we teach them day today about racism and how to treat other people... We’re supposed to be all as

one. And that's basically what I said in my paper, and then police brutality...It hasn't just been Black people, but a lot of them have been beating up on people of different races and treating people bad. And I tried to find a different way for how that can be stopped, but that's not gonna be stopped until they get put in jail for killing people. It's not gonna stop until they get a consequence, I guess.

Lewis mostly maintained an individualized, person-centered rationale for why racism persists and how to undo it. For Lewis, teaching children how to treat people is a key step. But Lewis also touched on the importance of police accountability, which reflects a systemic critique for why racial injustice remains. Lewis' Senior Project on racism was his critical action inspired by his critical reflections. Yet, while underscored by critical consciousness, it was a solitary, instead of collective, action. It also remained mostly under-seen, save for some teacher evaluators.

Macro-Level School Critical Action Participants were reluctant to build off the of Black Lives Matter movement energy for collective critical school action. Their inaction was partly due to their inability to imagine what school would even look like amidst COVID-19 related school closures and hybrid learning. But pervasive sentiments of Black students' marginal mattering also prevented participants from taking critical action steps. They thought administration would not bend to Black students' desires, regardless of critical action. Their skepticism stemmed from administrators' disinterest in acknowledging racial uprisings.

While they gained inspiration from peers' critical action to organize a LGBT-QIAP+ student group, participants believed administrators cared more about the needs of LGBTQIAP+ students than those of Black students, overall.

Tei: I think the only thing [County] care about is – what you said? Black Lives Matter? – they don't care about none of that... What's the letters?

Lewis: Yeah. LGBTQ.

Tei: That's all they care about... the only thing I would think that any Black Lives Matter would be up in the school is if kids posted it... I don't feel like they know much about it.

Horatio (research team member): What do you think would be the –

Tei: Most of my teachers are Caucasian, I don't think they know as much about it as I do.

Critical motivation for critical action stalled perhaps due to COVID-19-related social distancing between students and the school building. Signage related to Black Lives Matter or racial justice would affirm Black students' mattering. But if it appeared in the school, it would be because of students, and not teachers. For Tei, White teachers would have no experiential understanding, no personal ties to the causes heralded by Black Lives Matter. Without the favor of administrators, or teacher understandings of Black Lives Matter, participants doubted if any student-based critical actions would lead to positive changes at the school for Black students.

Discussion

Our study merged marginal mattering, or perceived insignificance accompanied by a fearful disdain, into a critical consciousness framework to shine light on how Black adolescent boys came to understand themselves, their schools, and the racialized and gendered factors that shape their worldviews, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and racial reckoning. Keying into their own marginal mattering factored into shaping all aspects of participants' critical consciousness development. In addition to witnessing and experiencing marginal mattering firsthand, imagery on television, social media, and video games, motivated youth to critically reflect on the racialized processes influencing their societal and school experiences. This finding supports other research showing the importance of digital media in informing adolescents about global affairs and societal problems, while also encouraging them to take part in bringing social change (Tanksley & Hunter, 2024; Wilf et al., 2022).

Also, incited by news and imagery, participants processed societal events during conversations with family members in ways that shaped their critical consciousness. This finding is consistent with Bañales et al.'s (2021) study that showed how essential family members are for helping adolescents process and cope with experiencing or witnessing injustice. However, social distancing measures kept participants home and near family members, which fostered more opportunities for such discussion than what might have occurred pre-pandemic.

Scholars emphasize the importance of educators for providing youth safe spaces to discuss inequalities and social justice and, in turn, facilitate critical reflection, motivation, and action (e.g., Farinde-Wu et al., 2021; Gómez & Cammarota, 2022; Seider et al., 2023). However, findings from our study illustrated how families played a more significant role in participants' critical reflection than educators. Participants indicated that their teachers offered almost no opportunities to discuss racial uprisings. Teachers' collective silence served to reinforce the perceived marginal mattering of Black boys (see Carey et al., 2022a) and thus wither already tenuous ties between Black boys and some educators. Said otherwise, because participants felt the plight of their racialized communities did not matter to their school, the boys themselves felt that they did not matter.

Dialoguing with peers around shared experiences is essential for critical consciousness development during adolescence (Aviles & Grigalunas, 2018; Fine et al., 2021; Heberle et al., 2020; Kennedy et al., 2020; Maker Castro et al., 2022). Such interactions encourage youth to reflect, as well as learn from others, on their experiences and beliefs about socio-political issues (Tyler et al., 2020). The virtual space our team cultivated with participants during focus group interviews strengthened their critical reflection, fostered debates on critical motivation, and allowed participants to speculate on the impacts of critical action.

Prior studies advocate different pathways for youth to become critically active in social justice movements or other political causes (e.g., Akiva et al., 2017; Carey et al., 2021; Tyler et al., 2020). Most participants manifested critical action on social media. However, participants mostly shared existing information,

instead of creating new content. This form of social media activism did reflect a growth in their critical consciousness development. But the passive nature of sharing previously crafted content instead of creating their own also reflected the lengths participants were willing to go to spread awareness on their causes of concern.

Along with social media, one participant leveraged his academic coursework to engage in a unique form of critical action. Prior research has shown marginalized youth academically over-performing to disprove racist stereotypes of their groups (Seider et al., 2020; Uriostegui et al., 2021). However, Lewis was inspired by the moment and chose a different academic pathway for engaging in critical action. Focusing his senior project on movements against systemic racism afforded him the chance to grow his knowledge on racial social unrest and share it publicly.

Although participants deepened their critical reflection and built some critical motivation, they did not engage in collective critical action. This finding mirrors prior work, which reveals this familiar absence—critical action—in youth's critical consciousness development (Diemer et al., 2021). However, assessing youths' rationales for their (in)action was complicated by COVID-19 school closures and social distancing mandates that deterred public gatherings. Staying home also protected family members. Most participants—except for the student athletes during their respective sport season—never entered the school building from mid-March of 2020 through most of the 2021 school year. As such, this study's context limited youths' options to express public forms of critical action both individually and collectively in society and in school.

Limitations

There were several limitations to our study. While our small sample prevents generalizability, findings are transferable for understanding how other Black adolescent boys in similar educational and environmental contexts might have navigated COVID-19 and racial unrest. Our study was also a reflection of the challenges of the time. Instead of meeting on a consistent day and time, like prior to school closures, we gathered data sporadically throughout the year. Researchers also faced COVID-19 stressors, and depending on familial needs and health concerns, our interview team was not always the same.

Also, instead of within controlled school-settings, we engaged participants virtually from their homes. Overall, Zoom served our data-collection purposes well, but not without challenges (e.g., unstable internet, diminished cell-phone connectivity). Participants' school-age siblings or other relatives were home and sometimes nearby during our focus groups, informing what participants disclosed. Depending on various factors, participants sometimes resisted turning their cameras on. Some joined from their beds, even during afternoon sessions. While not ideal, these were common real-life conditions for adolescent learners during COVID-19. But, building trust, patience, and concerted interest from the participants in making discussions work, helped minimize the impact of these limitations on diminishing the quality of the data.

Implications and Conclusions

Our participants paid considerable attention to how the public health crisis and racial reckoning affected them and their communities. Though researchers can build on what we learned here, like how important families are to processing social events and forging adolescent critical consciousness (see also Bañales et al., 2021; Glover et al., 2022), educational stakeholders have much further to go in this domain. Hence, findings also show what happens when educators ignore issues of concern to racially marginalized adolescents. Thus, implications urge stakeholders to take seriously adolescent meaning making especially throughout ongoing global racial struggle.

Incorporating other relational constructs into studies of youths' critical consciousness, that underscore youth self-concept development, like "mattering" to others, offers scholars a glimpse into other factors at play in shaping youths' connections to each other and their contexts. The impetus for enacting community change may deepen if adolescents understand their criticality as related to, or contingent upon, perceiving their mattering in schools, communities, or society. Through strengthening relationships between educators and their students, families, and communities, educators will learn more about oppressive forces that marginalize communities of color. In doing so, they will also grow in their capacities to center marginalized youths' experiences in the classroom, humanize them (see del Carmen Salazar, 2013), and deepen their mattering. Similarly, administrators could engage in one-on-one meetings or small group discussions with racially marginalized students to offer students opportunities to share insights that can inform broader school practices or policy creation.

Educators and other youth development workers can teach youth to interpret waves of messaging that emerge via digital platforms during times of heightened social unrest. Debates between policy makers and families over issues like Critical Race Theory and book bans—issues of particular concern to marginalized groups—have fueled widespread misunderstandings across social media. Educational stakeholders must consider content from media outlets as curricular artifacts to guide classroom learning explorations. Educators, who encourage dialogue on social justice-related imagery also deepen students' critical reflection, motivation, and possibly spur action. Here, educators would bring damaging messaging to the forefront for discussion and strategize with youth on how to resist through digital activism (see Tanksley & Hunter, 2024). Ignoring such messaging, especially that which is racialized, is not only a missed opportunity to bolster students' learning—all students' learning—but also an identity slight that diminishes students' perceived mattering to teachers or school generally.

Fostering in-school peer relationships are essential for bolstering youths' mattering and creating conditions for critical consciousness to emerge. The Black Boy Mattering Project provided fertile grounds for collective theorizing and healing. Similar focus groups could be organized by educational stakeholders, such as school counselors or social workers, as not only spaces for healing but also reflection sites to ponder ways to build stronger school cultures (e.g., restorative

community circles, peer mentoring and support groups, etc.; Nganga & Jamison, 2024).

Our findings speak to what educators deny youth when they uphold “political correctness” over building affirming spaces for oppressed youth. Our desire is that our work inspires researchers to craft humanizing projects that center youth voice and foster their liberatory aspirations. We also hope our research inspires stakeholders to believe the lives of Black boys matter enough to create schools that promote students’ critical mindsets so they can imagine and actualize better worlds for us all.

Funding The funding was provided by Spencer Foundation (Postdoctoral Research Development Award) and the University of Delaware Partnership for Public Education (PPE Fellowship).

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all co-authors, the corresponding author, Roderick L. Carey, states that there is no conflict of interest.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Abdul-Adil, J. (2014). From voiceless to victorious. In B. Porfilio, D. Roychoudhury, & L. M. Gardner (Eds.), *See you at the crossroads: Hip hop scholarship at the intersections* (pp. 149–168). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-674-5_9
- Akiva, T. M., Carey, R. L., Cross, A. B., Delale-O’Conner, L., & Brown, M. (2017). Reasons youth engage in activism programs: Social justice work or sanctuary? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 53*, 20–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2017.08.005>
- Animashaun, O., & Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2022). Time traveling forward and backward: Multimodal speculation as racial literacy. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 36*(3), 430–445. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2125179>
- Anyiwo, N., Palmer, G. J., Garrett, J. M., Starck, J. G., & Hope, E. C. (2020). Racial and political resistance: An examination of the sociopolitical action of racially marginalized youth. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 35*, 86–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.03.005>
- Aviles, A. M., & Grigalunas, N. (2018). “Project awareness:” Fostering social justice youth development to counter youth experiences of housing instability, trauma and injustice. *Children and Youth Services Review, 84*, 229–238. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.12.013>
- Bajaj, M., Argenal, A., & Canlas, M. (2017). Socio-politically relevant pedagogy for immigrant and refugee youth. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 50*(3), 258–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2017.1336499>
- Baldrige, B. J., DiGiacomo, D. K., Kirshner, B., Mejias, S., & Vasudevan, D. S. (2024). Out-of-school time programs in the United States in an era of racial reckoning: Insights on equity from practitioners, scholars, policy influencers, and young people. *Educational Researcher, 53*(4), 201–212. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X241228824>

- Bañales, J., Hope, E. C., Rowley, S. J., & Cryer-Coupet, Q. R. (2021). Raising justice-minded youth: Parental ethnic-racial and political socialization and Black youth's critical consciousness. *Journal of Social Issues*, 77(4), 964–986. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12486>
- Briggs, A. S., Hope, E. C., & Cryer-Coupet, Q. R. (2023). Patterns of critical consciousness and associations with sociocultural factors in Black adolescents. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 33(2), 313–331. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2658>
- Brooms, D. R. (2021). "He wanted everybody to succeed": Black males, relational trust, and school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, 25(1_part_4), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040035>
- Brown, A. L. (2018). From subhuman to human kind: Implicit bias, racial memory, and Black males in schools and society. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(1), 52–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1403176>
- Bryan, N. (2020). Shaking the bad boys: Troubling the criminalization of Black boys' childhood play, hegemonic white masculinity and femininity, and the school playground-to-prison pipeline. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(5), 673–692. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2018.1512483>
- Bryan, N., Davis, D. R., McMillian, R., Jackson, J., & Cooper, R. (2023). Toward a black PlayCrit in educational leadership: What school leaders need to know about Black boyhood play. *Journal of School Leadership*, 33(3), 269–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10526846221133999>
- Buchanan, L., Bui, Q., & Patel, J. K. (2020). *Black Lives Matter may be the largest movement in U.S. history*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>
- Butler-Barnes, S. T. (2023). "What's going on?" Racism, COVID-19, and centering the voices of Black youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 71(1–2), 101–113. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12646>
- Carey, R. L. (2019). Imagining the comprehensive mattering of Black boys and young men in society and schools: Toward a new approach. *Harvard Educational Review*, 89(3), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1943-5045-89.3.370>
- Carey, R. L. (2020). Making Black boys and young men matter: Radical relationships, future oriented imaginaries and other evolving insights for educational research and practice. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33(7), 729–744. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2020.1753255>
- Carey, R. L., Akiva, T., Abdellatif, H., & Daughtry, K. A. (2021). "And school won't teach me that!" Urban youth activism programs as transformative sites for critical adolescent learning. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(7), 941–960. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1784400>
- Carey, R. L., Farinde-Wu, A., Milner, H. R., & Delale-O'Conner, L. (2018). The culture and teaching gap: What is it, and how can teacher educators help to close it? In G. Hall, D. Gollnick, & L. Quinn (Eds.), *Handbook on teaching and learning* (pp. 59–78). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Carey, R. L., Polanco, C., & Blackman, H. (2022a). Black adolescent boys' perceived school mattering: From marginalization and selective love to radically affirming relationships. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 32(1), 151–169. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12706>
- Carey, R. L., Polanco, C., & Blackman, H. (2022b). Mattering in allied youth fields: Summoning the call of Black Lives Matter to radically affirm youth through programming. In T. Akiva & K. H. Robinson (Eds.), *It takes an ecosystem: Understanding the people, places, and possibilities of learning and development across settings* (pp. 67–86). Information Age Publishing.
- Carey, R. L., Vilceus, S. S., Polanco, C., Miller, M. X., Marianno, L., & Woelki, W. (2024). Studying and imagining mattering with Black boys: Mutual self-discoveries for collective healing and liberation. *Qualitative Inquiry*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004241269976>
- Curchin, E., Dahill-Brown, S., & Lavery, L. (2024). Reckoning with the "other" pandemic: How teachers' unions responded to calls for racial justice amidst COVID-19. *Educational Researcher*, 53(5), 296–307. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X241235634>
- Das, S., Pitts, J., Arevalo, K., Cox, B., Blood, T., Hughes, D., Coulanges, V., Keryc, C., Rogers, O., & Way, N. (2022). Lessons of resistance from Black mothers to their Black sons. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 32(3), 981–998. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12740>
- Davis, J. E. (2003). Early schooling and academic achievement of African American males. *Urban Education*, 38(5), 515–537. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085903256220>
- del Carmen Salazar, M. (2013). A humanizing pedagogy: Reinventing the principles and practice of education as a journey toward liberation. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 121–148. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12464032>


- DeMatthews, D. E., Carey, R. L., Olivarez, A., & Moussavi-Saeedi, K. (2017). Guilty as charged? Principals' perspectives and enactment of suspension and the racial discipline gap. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 53(4), 519–555. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X17714844>
- Diemer, M. A., Pinedo, A., Bañales, J., Mathews, C. J., Frisby, M. B., Harris, E. M., & McAlister, S. (2021). Recentering action in critical consciousness. *Child Development Perspectives*, 15(1), 12–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12393>
- Diemer, M. A., Rapa, L. J., Voight, A. M., & McWhirter, E. H. (2016). Critical consciousness: A developmental approach to addressing marginalization and oppression. *Child Development Perspectives*, 10(4), 216–221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12193>
- Duncan, K. E. (2022). 'That's my job': Black teachers' perspectives on helping Black students navigate white supremacy. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 25(7), 978–996. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1798377>
- Elliott, G. C., Kao, S., & Grant, A.-M. (2004). Mattering: Empirical validation of a social- psychological concept. *Self and Identity*, 3(4), 339–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1357650044000119>
- Farinde-Wu, A., Young, J. L., & Texeira, S. (2021). Chapter 3: Waking up woke—Exploring black female youth critical consciousness and sociopolitical development. *Teachers College Record*, 123(13), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812112301304>
- Fine, M., Finesurrey, S., Rodriguez, A., Almonte, J., Contreras, A., & Lam, A. (2021). "People are demanding justice": Pandemics, protests, and remote learning through the eyes of immigrant youth of color. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 36(5), 437–466. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584211034873>
- Flett, G. L. (2018). *The psychology of mattering: Understanding the human need to be significant*. Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/C2015-0-06160-3>
- Flett, G. L., Nepon, T., Goldberg, J. O., Rose, A. L., Atkey, S. K., & Zaki-Azat, J. (2022). The anti-mattering scale: Development, psychometric properties and associations with well-being and distress measures in adolescents and emerging adults. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 40(1), 37–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829211050544>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum.
- García, N. M., Ibarra, J. M., Mireles-Rios, R., Rios, V. M., & Maldonado, K. (2022). Advancing Quant-Crit to rethink the school-to-prison pipeline for Latinx and Black youth. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 33(2), 269–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2022.2027481>
- Garza, A. (2016). A herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In J. Hobson (Ed.), *Are all the women still white? Rethinking race, expanding feminisms* (pp. 23–28). State University of New York Press.
- Gayle Gabriel, M., Brown, A., León, M., & Outley, C. (2021). Power and social control of youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Leisure Sciences*, 43(1–2), 240–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1774008>
- Gipson, L. R. (2015). Is cultural competence enough? Deepening social justice pedagogy in art therapy. *Art Therapy*, 32(3), 142–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2015.1060835>
- Glover, C. S., Walker, A., & Bañales, J. (2022). Engagement coping responses to adolescents' negative racialized experiences. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 32(1), 134–150. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12727>
- Gómez, R. F., & Cammarota, J. (2022). Taking the teachers to school! critical consciousness emerging: A qualitative exploration of Mexican American youth's social justice orientation development. *The Urban Review*, 54(3), 339–366. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-021-00623-0>
- Gover, A. R., Harper, S. B., & Langton, L. (2020). Anti-Asian hate crime during the COVID-19 pandemic: Exploring the reproduction of inequality. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45(4), 647–667. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1>
- Gutstein, E. (2012). *Reading and writing the world with mathematics: Toward a pedagogy for social justice*. Routledge.
- Heberle, A. E., Rapa, L. J., & Farago, F. (2020). Critical consciousness in children and adolescents: A systematic review, critical assessment, and recommendations for future research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(6), 525–551. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000230>
- Hope, E. C., Smith, C. D., Cryer-Coupet, Q. R., & Briggs, A. S. (2020). Relations between racial stress and critical consciousness for Black adolescents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 70, 101184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101184>
- Hotchkins, B. K. (2016). African American males navigate racial microaggressions. *Teachers College Record*, 118(6), 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811611800603>

- Howard, T. C. (2021). Culturally relevant teaching: A pivot for pedagogical transformation and racial reckoning. *The Educational Forum*, 85(4), 406–415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2021.1957637>
- Jenkins, D. A., & Warren, C. A. (2024). Towards anti-carceral leadership: Remaking public schools to refuse Black students' surveillance, containment, and control. *Educational Policy*, 38(3), 624–641. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048231220024>
- Jett, C. C. (2022). "I have the highest GPA, but I can't be the valedictorian?": Two Black males' exclusionary valedictory experiences. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 25(2), 290–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1599341>
- Kennedy, H., Matyasic, S., Schofield Clark, L., Engle, C., Anyon, Y., Weber, M., Jimenez, C., Osiemo Mwirigi, M., & Nisle, S. (2020). Early adolescent critical consciousness development in the age of Trump. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 35(3), 279–308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558419852055>
- Lebron, C. J. (2023). *The making of Black lives matter: A brief history of an idea*. Oxford University Press.
- Madkins, T. C., & McKinney de Royston, M. (2019). Illuminating political clarity in culturally relevant science instruction. *Science Education*, 103(6), 1319–1346. <https://doi.org/10.1002/scs.21542>
- Maker Castro, E., Dull, B., Hoyt, L. T., & Cohen, A. K. (2022). Associations between critical consciousness and well-being in a national sample of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(2), 760–777. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22678>
- Marchand, A. D., Vassar, R. R., Diemer, M. A., & Rowley, S. J. (2019). Integrating race, racism, and critical consciousness in Black parents' engagement with school. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 11(3), 367–384. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12344>
- Marsh, L. T. S., & Walker, L. J. (2022). Deficit-oriented beliefs, anti-Black policies, punitive practices, and labeling: Exploring the mechanisms of disproportionality and its impact on Black boys in one urban "no-excuses" charter school. *Teachers College Record*, 124(2), 85–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681221086444>
- Marshall, S. K. (2001). Do I matter? Construct validation of adolescents' perceived mattering to parents and friends. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24(4), 473–490. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.2001.0384>
- Mathews, C. J. (2023). New directions in ethnic-racial identity and critical consciousness development: Contextual considerations in the aftermath of COVID-19. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 52, 101649. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101649>
- Milner, H. R., IV. (2007). Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 388–400. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07309471>
- Milner, H. R., IV. (2012). But what is urban education? *Urban Education*, 47(3), 556–561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912447516>
- Nganga, C., & Jamison, K. (2024). Learning to lead for equity and social justice through critical reflection and autobiography. *The Urban Review*, 56(2), 349–368. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-023-00678-1>
- Orellana, M. F., Liu, L., & Ángeles, S. L. (2022). "Reinventing ourselves" and reimagining education: Everyday learning and life lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Harvard Educational Review*, 92(3), 413–436. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-92.3.413>
- Patel, L. (2015). *Decolonizing educational research: From ownership to answerability*. Routledge.
- Pinedo, A., Frisby, M., Kubi, G., Vezaldenos, V., Diemer, M. A., Mcalister, S., & Harris, E. (2024). Charting the longitudinal trajectories and interplay of critical consciousness among youth activists. *Child Development*, 95(1), 296–312. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13977>
- Prilleltensky, I., & Prilleltensky, O. (2021). *How people matter: Why it affects health, happiness, love, work, and society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Quiles, T. B., Hoyt, L. T., Dotson, M. P., Maker Castro, E., May, M., & Cohen, A. K. (2023). Who has to act? A qualitative exploration of emerging adults' critical consciousness during the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 71(1–2), 136–146. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12638>
- Rios, V. M. (2011). *Punished: Policing the lives of Black and Latino boys*. New York University Press.
- Rosenberg, M., & McCullough, B. C. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance and mental health among adolescents. *Research in Community & Mental Health*, 2, 163–182.

- Saw, A., Yellowhorse, A. J., & Jeung, R. (2021). Stop AAPI hate mental health report. Retrieved from <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Mental-Health-Report-210527.pdf>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. *New Directions for Student Services*, 48, 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.37119894803>
- Sealey-Ruiz, Y., & Greene, P. (2015). Popular visual images and the (mis) reading of Black male youth: A case for racial literacy in urban preservice teacher education. *Teaching Education*, 26(1), 55–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2014.997702>
- Seider, S., Clark, S., & Graves, D. (2020). The development of critical consciousness and its relation to academic achievement in adolescents of color. *Child Development*, 91(2), e451–e474. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13262>
- Seider, S., Graves, D., El-Amin, A., Kelly, L., Soutter, M., Clark, S., Jennett, P., & Tamerat, J. (2023). The development of critical consciousness in adolescents of color attending “opposing” schooling models. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 38(1), 3–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584211006466>
- Seider, S., Tamerat, J., Clark, S., & Soutter, M. (2017). Investigating adolescents’ critical consciousness development through a character framework. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(6), 1162–1178. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0641-4>
- Tanksley, T., & Hunter, A. (2024). Black youth, digital activism and racial battle fatigue: How Black youth enact hope, humor and healing online. In J. Connor (Ed.), *Handbook of youth activism* (pp. 272–289). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803923222.00032>
- Thomas, D. J., III, Johnson, M. W., Clark, L., & Harrison, L., Jr. (2022). When the mirage fades: Black boys encountering antiblackness in a predominantly white Catholic high school. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 25(7), 958–977. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1798376>
- Tucker, C., Dixon, A., & Griddine, K. S. (2010). Academically successful African American male urban high school students’ experiences of mattering to others at school. *Professional School Counseling*, 14(2), 135–145. <https://doi.org/10.5330/prsc.14.2.k215671rj018g134>
- Tyler, C. P., Olsen, S. G., Geldhof, G. J., & Bowers, E. P. (2020). Critical consciousness in late adolescence: Understanding if, how, and why youth act. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 70, 101165. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101165>
- Uriostegui, M., Roy, A. L., & Li-Grining, C. P. (2021). What drives you? Black and Latinx youth’s critical consciousness, motivations, and academic and career activities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 50(1), 58–74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01343-6>
- Watts, R. J., Diemer, M. A., & Voight, A. M. (2011). Critical consciousness: Current status and future directions. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 134, 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.310>
- Weidman, S., Levine, D. T., Louwagie, F., Blackmore, K., Theron, L. C., & Stekel, D. J. (2024). The role of multisystemic resilience in fostering critical agency: UK adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Current Psychology*, 43(18), 16833–16847. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04578-1>
- Wilf, S., Maker Castro, E., Gupta, K. G., & Wray-Lake, L. (2022). Shifting culture and minds: Immigrant-origin youth building critical consciousness on social media. *Youth & Society*, 55(8), 1589–1614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X221103890>
- Wray-Lake, L., Alvis, L., Plummer, J. A., Shubert, J., & Syvertsen, A. K. (2023). Adolescents’ developing awareness of inequality: Racial and ethnic differences in trajectories. *Child Development*, 94(2), 439–457. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13870>

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Authors and Affiliations

Roderick L. Carey¹  · Camila Polanco¹  · Horatio Blackman² ·
Kendell A. Daughtry¹ · Holly R. Abrams¹ · Mark X. Miller¹ · Latrice Marianno³ ·
Sophia Sunshine Vilceus⁴ · Epie Alobwede¹ · William Woelki¹

✉ Roderick L. Carey
rlcarey@udel.edu

Camila Polanco
cpolanco@udel.edu

Horatio Blackman
hblackman89@gmail.com

Kendell A. Daughtry
kallen@udel.edu

Holly R. Abrams
abramsh@udel.edu

Mark X. Miller
mxmiller@udel.edu

Latrice Marianno
lmarian@siue.edu

Sophia Sunshine Vilceus
svilceus@udel.edu

Epie Alobwede
epiealob@gmail.com

William Woelki
woelki@udel.edu

¹ Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Education and Human Development, University of Delaware, 124 Alison Hall, Newark, DE 19716, USA

² Human Services Division: Youth, Family & Community Program Area, American Institutes for Research, Arlington, VA, USA

³ Department of Educational Leadership, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Edwardsville, IL, USA

⁴ School of Education, College of Education and Human Development, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA