

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



The Potential for Youth Programs to Promote African American Youth's Development of Ethnic and Racial Identity

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Adolescents, Youth Programs, Racial Identity, Ethnic Identity, Black Youth, Positive Youth Development

POPULATION GROUPS

Racialized Youth
Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

SOURCE

Academic

“Programs for youth can positively influence African American youth’s development of ethnic–racial identity, which has implications not only for African American youth’s positive development in these programs, but also for policy and practice regarding youth programming in African American communities” (p. 37).

1. What is the research about?

This research is about how youth programs can support Black youth in developing racial and ethnic identities that support their wellbeing. Previous research has shown that cultural assets (e.g. having a strong, positive ethnic-racial identity) can be linked to positive development and overall wellbeing for young people. As such, this article presents a framework to map out how youth programs can impact Black youth’s development in this area, and reviews programs that have taken an evidence-based approach to doing this work.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research is a literature review that included studies on youth programs focused on developing racial or ethnic identity and that work with Black youth in the United States.

3. Who is this research about?

The participants in the studies reviewed ranged from grade five to high school-aged. Twelve out of the 13 programs reviewed worked with Black youth, while the final program worked with Black and Latino youth.

4. How was the research done?

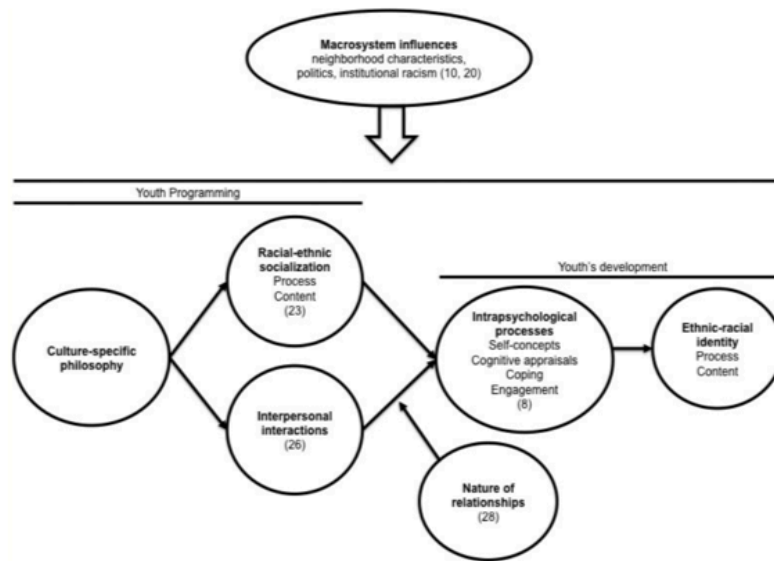
The researchers applied a conceptual framework that they established to understand how Black youth develop an ethnic-racial identity (see Figure 1., below) to articles they found on programs working with Black youth. They found these articles using academic search engines and the terms “racial identity,” “ethnic identity,” “youth development,” and “youth program.” They only included programs that worked with Black youth by also using the search terms “Black” and “African American.” After reviewing the 13 initial studies they found, the researchers decided to include only nine, as these studies had evaluated their direct/indirect impact on participants’ ethnic-racial identity.

5. What are the key findings?

Using their framework (see Figure 1., below), the researchers identified some common characteristics of the programs they reviewed:

- **Macrosystem Influences**
All of the programs explicitly named systemic/institutional/structural racism as the motivation for their program.
- **Culture-Specific Philosophy**
All of the programs used either an Afrocentric or other culturally-specific philosophy to frame their work, which centered Black heritage and culture.
- **Racial–Ethnic Socialization**
Programs intentionally focused on building ethnic-racial pride and positive collective identity, as well as promoting Black culture and heritage.

Figure 1. Conceptual model depicting the association between youth programs and African American youth's ethnic-racial identity (p. 31).



- **Interpersonal Interactions**

Interactive activities were used in most programs to ensure that youth and staff would communicate, connect, and learn together. These activities included games, role playing, and group projects.

- **Nature of Relationships**

Some of the programs highlighted the significance of the nature of relationships. As much as possible, programs intentionally hired staff and facilitators that shared the race and gender of the youth participants.

Out of the nine programs reviewed, six programs demonstrated positive effects on ethnic-racial identity in youth participants. One program with middle school girls showed that racial identity was stable during the program, but declined in the control group (girls of the same age who did not participate in the program). Another program with boys showed no effect on racial identity (however, this study did not include a control group for comparison). Only one program had negative effects on ethnic identity development, which the researchers suggest may be due to the fact that the program focused heavily on experiences of racism; they speculate that participants may have distanced themselves from their racial identity to protect their sense of self.

The authors propose that youth programs can support Black youth's development of a positive ethnic-racial identity "by adopting a culture-specific philosophy that informs racial-ethnic socialization practices (e.g., choice of culture-specific curriculum and activities) and opportunities for meaningful interpersonal interactions. Elements of programs for youth are influenced by the nature of interpersonal relationships

within the program and mediated by youth's intrapsychological processes. This process is embedded within several macrosystem influences that affect both the program and African American youth" (p. 30).

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Adolescence is an important time in terms of forming an ethnic-racial identity; as children grow into teenagers, they are more likely to encounter racial discrimination as they spend less time at home and more time in public spaces, and they may also begin to try to make sense of experiences of discrimination. Within this context, **youth programs and youth workers can play a critical role in providing a space to process and interrogate experiences of discrimination and build positive ethnic-racial identities.**

While youth programs may be influenced by macrosystems (for example, they may feel pressure to frame Black youth as 'at-risk' in order to access funding), they can simultaneously **counter these problematic narratives by positioning Black culture and identity as an asset within their programming.** Ultimately, the studies reviewed in this article point to the fact that youth programs, when intentionally planned and carefully executed, can have a positive impact on Black youth's ethnic-racial identity.



Loyd, A.B., & Williams, B.V. (2017). The potential for youth programs to promote African American youth's development of ethnic and racial identity. *Child Development Perspectives*, 11(1), 29-38.