

Relocating the Deficit: Reimagining Black Youth in Neoliberal Times



“I think that we’ve really struggled with articulating youth development in a way that resonates with funders, because they want to know how many kids didn’t get pregnant or [are] not on drugs. There’s a lot of deficit language in the youth development world. ... Funders want to know how many people did you save. And guess what? We’re not saving anybody; people save themselves. I believe that” (p. 462).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research focuses on the pressures placed on youth workers and youth programs to adopt deficit-based narratives when framing Black youth to compete for funding. **Deficit-based** refers to a perspective that focuses on describing Black youth mainly in terms of ‘problems’, ‘risks’ or ‘failures’, rather than recognizing their strengths and capabilities – positioning Black youth as a group that needs to be ‘saved’ or ‘fixed’.

The study explores how funding structures and education systems shape the way Black youth are imagined and constructed, and how this influences the support they receive in after-school community-based youth programs. There is a particular focus on **neoliberal** education policies, which emphasize competition, privatization, and measurable outcomes such as test scores and graduation rates.

The study also highlights the complex ways youth workers challenge deficit-based views to create a more humanizing approach to youth work.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

This research took place at Educational Excellence, an after-school community-based college completion and youth development program founded in 1989 in an urban community in the Northeast United States. Staff intentionally hire youth workers who share the program’s asset-based approach to youth work and who reflect the demographic of youth served (primarily Black and Latinx youth from low-income communities). Educational Excellence’s urban context, reliance on private funding, and competition with charter schools made it a strong setting to study how race and broader education policies influence youth work practice.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research focuses on 20 youth workers employed at Educational Excellence and their experiences working within a youth sector shaped by neoliberal policies. The participants were predominantly Black: 16 identified as Black/African American, 2 as white, 1 as Latina, and 1 as biracial (Afro-Latina). Five participants were men and 15 were women, ranging in age from 24 to approximately 65 years. Their involvement in the organization ranged from 2 months to 10 years.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The study utilized a **critical ethnographic approach**, which is a **qualitative** research method that examines people’s experiences within their broader social, cultural, and political contexts. Ethnography involves extended observation and engagement in a real-world setting to understand everyday practices and meanings. The researcher spent 13 months in the field collecting data through **participant observation**, **individual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions**, **three focus groups**, and **analysis of program materials and organizational documents**. The open-ended questions allowed the researcher to actively examine the language youth workers used to describe and define Black youth in the program.

The researcher's **positionality** was also important: a Black American woman and a former youth worker at Educational Excellence. This gave her insight and contextual knowledge about the organization that others may not have been granted.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The research found that **youth workers experience significant tension** between their commitment to holistic youth development and the demands of neoliberal funding systems.

Key findings include:

- Youth programs face **pressure to frame Black youth as deficient** to attract funding, political support, and public recognition.
- Social and emotional development, such as confidence, identity formation, and empowerment, are **difficult to measure** and therefore harder to fund.
- Academic success metrics often **overshadow the broader developmental work** that youth workers believe supports young people's long-term success.
- Programs sometimes **reduce or sacrifice leadership and identity-based programming** (for example, Youth Leadership Development) to prioritize test preparation.
- **Competition** with charter schools further limits funding opportunities for community-based programs.

Despite these pressures, youth workers **actively resist deficit narratives** by using asset-based language and practices that emphasize youth strengths and potential.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research is important for youth work because it highlights how **policy and funding constraints shape everyday youth work practice**, often limiting the holistic approaches youth workers may want to use to support young people. It shows the tension between youth workers who want to use an asset-driven approach and the pressure to adopt deficit-based framing to secure funding within a neoliberal framework.

The **overreliance on academic markers of success**, such as test scores and graduation rates, can narrow the overall definition of success for youth. Funding pressures may lead programs to limit who they admit or prioritize youth who already meet certain performance benchmarks, out of concern for maintaining strong statistics. Social and emotional programming, although central to youth wellbeing and even academic success, often receives less funding because it is harder to measure.

This research also reminds us that **language matters**. Deficit-based language and approaches can limit youth agency and overlook existing strengths and capabilities. This study **encourages youth workers to adopt a broader definition of success beyond test scores, and to prioritize asset-based philosophies**. It also helps youth workers recognize how **external systems influence their programs** and the importance of **actively resisting harmful narratives** about Black youth. Reimagining Black youth in more humanizing ways can ultimately shape how we design programs and how to engage with young people in practice.



Baldrige, B. J. (2014). Relocating the deficit: Reimagining Black youth in neoliberal times. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(3), 440–472.