



# Creating Opportunities for Mutual Affiliation

Gang Prevention and Relational-Cultural Theory in Project YES

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American youth do not have equal access to academic success and life achievements. In particular, low-income male students of color are disproportionately failing in school, filling prisons, and enduring the consequences of low social capital and poor investment in their futures (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

Indeed, a large body of research documents the lifelong impact of cumulative disadvantage, including poor physical, mental, and emotional health (Cohen, Janicki-Deverts, Chen, & Matthews, 2010). Unfortunately, many young people cope with poverty and life in high-crime neighborhoods by joining gangs and pursuing other antisocial behaviors that compound their personal challenges. The “fraternal interdependence” (Spergel, 1995, p. 50) offered by gangs makes youth who have been exposed to multiple risk factors vulnerable to recruitment.

To prevent gang affiliation, afterschool programs need to foster practices and adult-youth relationships that recreate the group identification and social status that gangs often offer to marginalized youth (Spergel, 1995). Even youth who face extreme marginalization and poverty experience gains in self-efficacy and emotional safety when they have nurturing

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connections with caring adults (Sta. Maria, Martinez, & Diestro, 2014). A study of more than 12,000 adolescents revealed that a sense of connection to a caring adult was the most important factor in reduced risk for a multitude of negative factors, regardless of differences in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family composition (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). However, the extent to which specific relationship-building strategies are used in afterschool programs that serve high-risk youth is largely unexplored. Even the extensive report of Eccles and Gootman (2002), which summarized work to pinpoint the kinds of physical, intellectual, and emotional support adolescents need to thrive, acknowledges that little is known about effective youth development programs that serve the highest-risk youth.

The stakes for youth and communities are continuously rising. Privatization of prisons and “tough on crime” laws have contributed to escalating incarceration rates, especially among Black and Latino males (Street, 2001). Children of prisoners are five times more likely to be imprisoned themselves than other children (Street, 2001). Identifying a specific youth development model and particular relationship-building strategies that can serve young people who are vulnerable to these dire outcomes would be invaluable for afterschool programs in low-income communities.

Our case study takes an inductive approach to examine how growth-fostering relational-cultural strategies were used in a gang prevention afterschool program in a high-risk neighborhood. We use relational-cultural theory as the theoretical foundation to examine how the program facilitated relationship building among staff, students, and parents. Our findings suggest that relational-cultural theory may be a useful tool in designing violence prevention programs for youth.

## Context

This case study focuses on Project YES (Youth Empowerment Success), an afterschool gang prevention program at the Thurgood Marshall Middle School (TMMS) in Lynn, Massachusetts. Project YES was created in 2005 by a violence prevention task force including representatives from city government, public schools, community organizations, and North Shore Community

College. The program targets students with characteristics that put them at risk of gang involvement, including low academic achievement, delinquency, negative peer relationships, and known association with gang members (Spergel, 1995). Program goals include keeping youth out of gangs, increasing high school graduation and college admission rates, building self-esteem, fostering positive decision making, reducing crime, and giving youth “a fighting chance” to overcome barriers to success (Davis, 2005, p. 15).

## Project YES Staffing and Structure

At the time of our study in 2013, Project YES staff included a program director, a parent outreach worker, a computer specialist, and other program staff, all of whom were Lynn public school teachers. Most but not all teachers were male. Current teachers at TMMS were intentionally woven into the program design to provide vital links between the program and the school. Program activities were implemented with support from program assistants, outside presenters, and male and female volunteer mentors.

Project YES focuses on male students because boys are more likely than girls to join gangs. In 2013, Project YES met twice a week during the school year and three times a week during a six-week summer session. Approximately 30–35 middle school boys, ages 12–14, participated to varying degrees. Some joined in sixth grade and stayed until eighth-grade graduation, while others joined in seventh or eighth grades.

All students in Project YES are expected to maintain consistent program and school attendance, demonstrate improved academic effort and performance over time, and exhibit improved social skills with peers and teachers. If expectations are not met, consequences included loss of privileges such as participation in field trips or, as a last resort, removal from the program.

Project YES features multiple components central to positive youth development, all offered in the context of caring relationships with adults: academic support such as tutoring and computer lab work; life skills including nonviolent conflict resolution, socio-emotional learning, and communication skills; career development including college visits, community service, and one-on-one

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mentoring; and recreational or fitness activities including basketball and field trips (Davis, 2005).

Recognizing that supportive relationships are often missing in the lives of marginalized youth (Jones & Deutsch, 2010), Project YES emphasizes—as a foundational and bidirectional program practice—opportunities for participants to form healthy relationships with peers and other adults in a safe environment. Rather than being simply *something they want to do* once school is over, Project YES is a place where students can *become someone they want to be*.

### **Student and Community Demographics**

According to the 2011 National Opportunity to Learn Report on Massachusetts, children of color are disproportionately represented in poorly resourced, low-performing schools. Project YES participants—predominantly male youth of color who live in poverty—face significant obstacles to academic and life success. Like others of their class and race nationwide, they are far more likely to drop out of high school than their white or middle class counterparts and are more likely to suffer suspension or expulsion for nonviolent offenses (North Shore Community College, n.d.). Lynn students receive out-of-school suspension at a rate three times the Massachusetts average (North Shore Community College, n.d.). Such exclusionary public school responses to behavioral issues can increase students' shame and isolation and add to the accumulation of disadvantage over time (Ruiz, 2005). Many Project YES parents, like other parents facing time and income poverty (Dodson & Albelda, 2012), have limited availability to engage consistently in their children's academic lives.

The ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of Project YES students reflects the diversity of the city of Lynn. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Lynn residents were 32 percent Latino, 13 percent African American, and 48 percent white. In 2012, Project YES participants were 47 percent Latino, 13 percent African American, 13 percent

Asian, 17 percent multiracial, and only 10 percent white (Project YES, 2012). Fully 90 percent of TMMS students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (North Shore Community College, n.d.).

### **Relational-Cultural Theory**

Relational-cultural theory is rooted in psychotherapy and in methods of promoting psychological well-being developed at the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at the Wellesley Centers for Women, founded in 1981 at Wellesley College. In contrast to dominant psychological theories of human development that emphasize separation and individuation of the self as cornerstones of healthy psychological growth, relational-cultural theorists suggest that self-development is a lifelong process based on healthy relationships with other

people; the process is characterized by increased power because of authentic connection (Bergman, 1991). According to Jordan and Hartling (2002), “practitioners essentially honor growth and safety through connection, not through separation or imposing power over others” (p. 8). Optimal human development is characterized by “a realization of increased relational competence over the life span” (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 280). Historically known as “self-in-relation” theory (Jordan & Hartling, 2002, p. 10), relational-cultural theory says that a crucial component of this mutuality is an understanding of one's effect on other people.

Particularly for people from marginalized groups disconnected from themselves and others by their sociocultural realities—

school expulsions, high unemployment, interpersonal violence, incarceration, and the like—intentionally developing the tenets of relational-cultural theory can build long-lasting insights and connections that promote relational resilience (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). Recognizing that interpersonal differences, especially when exacerbated by sociocultural imbalances, create severe disconnection, relational-cultural theory acknowledges power differences and their effect on human potential.

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According to proponents of relational-cultural theory, growth-fostering relationships can help high-risk students to discard negative aspects of the “social inheritance” that seems to have encased them at birth (Gladwell, 2008, p. 175). The primary vehicle of increased relational capacity that fosters growth is relationships based on *mutual* empathy. Relational-cultural theory posits that individuals in healthy relationships recognize and actualize five essential elements—“the five good things”:

1. Increased zest
2. Greater clarity of self and others
3. Increased ability to take action
4. Increased empathy
5. The desire to build more relationships (Jordan, 2001)

Relational-cultural theory recognizes that people do not thrive in isolation but rather depend on positive social connection to actualize the best in their lives.

### **Previous Research on Relational-Cultural Theory**

Though many books and working papers have explored relational-cultural theory in a variety of settings, few studies have documented its impact. One that comes close is a qualitative study of how urban and suburban youth described their relationships with important adults in their lives. Spencer, Jordan, and Sazama (2002) conducted focus groups with 91 youth from a variety of social, economic, and cultural contexts. The critical elements of good relationships with adults that these youth identified reflect the core tenets of relational-cultural theory. In particular, the youth cited *mutuality*, in which the “responsiveness of both partners forms the core . . . , and each individual develops a sense of relational competence,” as a key ingredient of caring relationships with adults (Spencer et al., 2002, p. 8).

In addition, the effect of increased relational competence among youth peers has been documented in a group setting. Cannon, Hammer, Reicherzer, and Gilliam (2012) facilitated a curriculum specifically

designed around relational-cultural theory to examine its effect on relational aggression. Their findings support the potential of creating “transformative relational competencies” by intentionally using relational-cultural principles to guide program practice and adult-youth interactions (Cannon et al., 2012, p. 3).

### **Relational-Cultural Theory in Programs for High-Risk Youth**

Although by nature humans yearn for connection, institutionalized oppression and personal experiences of trauma or betrayal may erode the ability of students to form positive connections (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). As a result, youth often experience the “central relational paradox” described by relational-cultural theory (Ruiz, 2005, p. 49): In order to avoid further psychological pain, they behave in ways that further isolate them from human connection. For example, the students who most need academic or emotional support may, in order to avoid a sense of shame or incompetence, act out in the classroom and then be removed from the class. Bergman (1991) emphasizes that socialization of males in particular creates “agents of disconnection” fueled by anger that can lead to aggression and violence (p. 7).

One way afterschool programs like Project YES can cope with this central relational paradox is to implement intentional strategies that promote affiliation and mutual empathy. Though Project YES was not explicitly built on the tenets of relational-cultural theory, its stated goals are consistent with the theory, and our study confirms the presence of “the five good things.” While maintaining appropriate professional boundaries, staff intentionally share their “real selves” in order to build relationships with youth. Project YES staff do not see themselves as the givers and students as the recipients. Rather, students are empowered to realize that they affect teachers’ lives just as the adults influence them. This key distinction characterizes a youth development model that may best serve high-risk youth. Proponents contend that understanding relational-cultural theory and its practice can deepen programs’ positive effects by demonstrating how to form supportive adult-child relationships based on mutuality. Such relationships can reduce individual and

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societal costs associated with “emotional misattunement” (Goleman, 1995, p. 101).

Relational-cultural theory defines *culture* as a broad construct of social and cultural contextual factors including not only race and ethnicity but also gender, socioeconomic status, geography, educational attainment, and so on—all of which influence how people think and feel about themselves (Hartling, 2003). Particularly in an economically depressed and multicultural community like Lynn, “internalized cultural relational images” (Ruiz, 2005, p. 46) can have profound effects. For example, Latino Project YES participants may deal with a cultural expectation that they must be “tough” and never back down from a fight. Understanding of such internalized images must be explicitly woven into program delivery and staff training.

Comstock and colleagues (2008) noted that “culture-based relational disconnections” are especially important in addressing program staff competency levels (p. 280). For example, adults with middle-class backgrounds and belief systems can completely misunderstand the actions of children who live in poverty unless they are trained to make cultural connections. Differences in power and privilege can derail healthy relationships, capacity for resilience, and self-efficacy—unless they are counterbalanced by growth-fostering relationships. Relational-cultural practices may also help poor and immigrant families strengthen their connections to their children’s school.

Our case study used relational-cultural theory as a lens to explore how Project YES worked to form youth-adult relationships characterized by mutual empathy and empowerment. We used the qualitative methods outlined below to investigate how adults involved with Project YES understood and demonstrated relational-cultural strategies—though neither staff nor parents had been explicitly exposed to relational-cultural theory. Our study revealed that staff and students shared relationships characterized by mutuality and deepened by “the five good things.”

## Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 adults involved in Project YES: five parents of program participants or alumni and six staff members. All five of the parents interviewed were women. Three were Latina, one Southeast Asian, and one white. The four parents of color were immigrants. The five male and one female staff interviewees were all white. Teachers in the Lynn school district are predominately white (75 percent), though only 29 percent are male (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013).

## Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

To recruit Project YES parents, the lead researcher announced our study at a Project YES event, and the program director facilitated contact with parents of alumni. The four parents of current students and one alumni parent we interviewed were paid \$25 apiece for their time. To recruit staff, we used a modified snowball sampling procedure. First we interviewed the onsite Project YES site coordinator, and then he helped to identify and recruit additional staff. All staff members were recruited, and a total of six—one intern and five paid staffers—completed interviews.

One researcher conducted all 11 interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. One parent was interviewed by phone; the other 10 interviews were conducted in person. The researcher took notes by hand during the interviews. Eight of the 11 interviews were also audio-recorded and later reviewed to confirm the accuracy of the notes. The first three interviews were not taped because participants signaled apprehension at being recorded.

We used a combination of closed and open-ended interview questions followed by probes to identify the presence or absence of elements of relational-cultural theory in Project YES participants, staff, and parents. Table 1 shows sample interview questions for each of “the five good things.” In addition to questions related to relational-cultural theory, open-ended interview questions allowed participants to express their own interpretations of social meanings in Project YES. For instance, the interviewer asked participants to discuss what they liked best and least about Project YES, what they perceived to be the program’s goals, what they saw as program highlights, and what they would change.

## Data Analysis

Following Yin (2010), we used both inductive and deductive strategies for data analysis. We let “the five good things” of relational-cultural theory serve as our first set of categories, focusing on the extent to which these concepts appeared in our data. Because “the five good things” are a two-way street, benefiting all parties in a relationship, we looked for the development of these elements not only in students but also in staff and parents. For the inductive portion of the analysis, we drew on open and axial coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify themes in the data. To address intercoder reliability, two researchers participated in the coding process.

We used several strategies to support the validity of our findings. First, interviewing not only Project YES staff

**Table 1. The Five Good Things and Sample Interview Questions**

The Five Good Things of Relational-Cultural Theory	Definition*	Interview Question
<b>INCREASED ZEST</b>	Does this relationship give you more energy because of the connection with each other?	Parent question: What is something you can offer other parents in the [school] community?
<b>GREATER CLARITY</b>	Do you have a greater understanding of yourself as a person and your connection with other people?	Staff question: Does an adult’s role and interaction with Project YES students differ from other teachers, staff, or other adults at [school]?
<b>INCREASED ABILITY TO TAKE ACTION</b>	Does this relationship increase your sense of empowerment and agency to act on your own behalf?	Parent question: What is your relationship with your child’s teacher? Has Project YES made it easier to connect with the teacher?
<b>INCREASED EMPATHY</b>	Does this relationship allow you to see things from others’ point of view and “walk in their shoes”?	Staff question: Did you receive training for your work with Project YES students? Did you learn new approaches to students that you hadn’t used before?
<b>DESIRE TO BUILD MORE RELATIONSHIPS</b>	Does this relationship encourage you to connect with others and build trust with other people?	Parent question: Does Project YES recognize your culture in its programs or activities?

\* Source: Ruiz, 2005.

but also parents enabled us to gather varied perceptions and accounts of social interactions and program activities. Second, we asked study participants to confirm the accuracy of emergent themes in a process known as respondent validation (Maxwell, 2009; Yin, 2010). Comments from study participants indicated that our conclusions have face validity. Finally, to corroborate our findings, we reviewed Project YES documents including three annual grant reports, a comprehensive United Way community youth survey (Surr & Richer, 2011), staff-generated outcome reports on student progress in program years 2010–2012, and demographic data collected by the City of Lynn and the U.S. Census Bureau.

### **Evidence of Relational-Cultural Theory in Project YES**

Adult stakeholders implicitly identified elements of “the five good things” at work in Project YES. Parents and staff

members gave multiple examples of students and staff having developed the core elements of relational-cultural theory.

All of the parents we interviewed said that their children demonstrated increased zest by spending more time on homework and becoming more involved in school activities. Most parents shared examples of increased clarity; their sons began to connect their present academic effort to the possibility of college admission in, as one staff person put it, “a world outside of Lynn.” All five parents said that children clearly demonstrated higher levels of empowerment, as grades, attendance, and behavior improved. Most said that students had developed increased empathy and that they expressed a greater desire for relationships by engaging more with their families and becoming role models for younger siblings. Table 2 shows examples of parent responses related to “the five good things.”

**Table 2. Parent Responses Related to Elements of Relational-Cultural Theory**

Element	Sample Parent Responses
<b>ZEST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He’s more interested in sports and music.</li> <li>• He does more homework now; he wants to do well.</li> <li>• He helps more in the house, has better behavior, is a better person.</li> </ul>
<b>CLARITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He is more self-confident, sure of himself.</li> <li>• He now knows his value and what he needs to do to be a good man.</li> </ul>
<b>ABILITY TO TAKE ACTION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He thinks about college, talks about college.</li> <li>• [Project Yes staff] reinforce the idea that the outcome of your life is your decision.</li> <li>• [Staff] have 110 percent helped him reach his dreams.</li> </ul>
<b>EMPATHY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He is calmer, more likely to apologize if he’s in the wrong.</li> <li>• The teachers share part of their own stories with the kids.</li> </ul>
<b>DESIRE FOR RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He is more near to me. We talk more.</li> <li>• Now he is involved in more things.</li> <li>• He goes [to Project YES] every time and wants to be part of the group.</li> </ul>

**Table 3. Staff Responses Related to Elements of Relational-Cultural Theory**

Element	Sample Staff Responses
<b>ZEST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kids participated more in the Poetry Slam event because of staff engagement.</li> <li>• Kids feel more comfortable going to school.</li> </ul>
<b>CLARITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When we went to [a local college], you could see that a light bulb went off; higher education does exist for them.</li> <li>• The field trips help to open up their eyes and see there is a whole world outside of Lynn.</li> </ul>
<b>ABILITY TO TAKE ACTION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The kids now strive to get into the top high schools in Lynn.</li> <li>• Many kids start with failing grades and move to principal’s list of As and Bs.</li> </ul>
<b>EMPATHY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The kids know we care about them as people, not just students.</li> <li>• Because [the youth] see us as real people, we can ask, “What’s going on at home?”</li> <li>• Each kid has a different story. We have to adapt to the kids’ needs and wait until they’re ready for [us] to address them.</li> </ul>
<b>DESIRE FOR RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our kids will talk to us. They trust us.</li> <li>• I introduced the kids to my dad at a sports field trip when I was coaching. I wanted them to get to know my family.</li> </ul>

Similarly, all six staff interviewees saw “the five good things” in their interactions with students. All exhibited increased zest in their consistently positive responses to the question, “What do you like best about Project YES?” One teacher said that witnessing the positive changes exhibited by the students was “the reason I got into education in the first place: to work on a program like this.” A staff person gave an example of increased clarity in interactions with students, reporting that she felt afraid before coming to Project YES but now looked forward to spending time with students. Increased empowerment was illustrated as one staff member described how students learned together by sharing their knowledge and experiences. Staff revealed increased empathy as they spoke about the need to adapt their own behavior to the stories of individual students, rather than adopting a cookie-cutter approach. The desire for more relationship was evident when three teachers reported that they

introduced students to their own families. Table 3 displays more examples of staff responses that correspond to “the five good things.”

In addition to these large themes, a number of sub-themes emerged during analysis of interviews. Staff and parents said that Project YES:

- Reduced participants’ social stigmas
- Expanded participants’ aspirations for the future
- Helped “outsiders,” including both students and parents, to better integrate into the larger community
- Helped align parents and staff in achieving Project YES goals for students
- Treated parents as participants, but not as consistent contributors

Table 4 shows how each of these sub-themes aligns with “the five good things” and illustrates them with examples from our data.

**Table 4. Interview Sub-Themes**

Sub-Theme	Relational-Cultural Theory	Examples
<b>Reduction in Social Stigmas</b>	Zest, empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project YES has lost its “bad kid” stigma.</li> <li>• A “we can do it mentality” is a student strength.</li> </ul>
<b>Expanding Future Aspirations</b>	Clarity, empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project YES encouraged exploration of the world outside of Lynn and “encouraged [participants] to live a different life.”</li> </ul>
<b>Integration of “Outsiders” with the Larger Community</b>	Desire for more relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After learning about parental computer controls, one parent said she felt empowered to share her son’s participation in the digital world.</li> <li>• Students feel “like a family” and “try to help each other out” at school and in the neighborhood.</li> </ul>
<b>Alignment of Parents and Staff</b>	Clarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both staff and parents focused on building positive youth assets, developing leadership, helping students succeed, and “showing them they can go to college.”</li> </ul>
<b>Parents as Participants but not Contributors</b>	Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents were not asked to share their culture or talents. Staff were not clear about the role of parents.</li> </ul>



Specific ways program delivery enhanced “the five good things” were revealed in the interviews.

- Staff increased students’ zest by emphasizing the importance of homework and consistent school attendance.
- Field trips to college campuses, a predictable program structure, and expression of a genuine belief in students’ ability to achieve promoted clarity.
- Weekly celebration of student achievements helped to increase students’ belief in their ability to take action.
- Mutuality increased empathy and connectedness. Staff acted not as authoritarian teachers but as authoritative figures who nurtured authentic connection. Staff and workshop presenters also taught social and communication skills to help students understand the effect of their words and actions on others.
- Parents said that their sons showed a desire for more relationships by becoming more attentive to younger siblings and more willing to participate in family activities.

### Implications for Practice and Policy

This case study explored the presence of relational-cultural theory tenets in Project YES. According to both parents and staff, cultivation of what relational-cultural theorists call “growth fostering” relationships promoted “the five good things” in Project YES participants. Even though staff did not intentionally integrate relational-cultural theory, its key ingredients appear to have contributed to the success of Project YES students in a way that can serve as an example of program design for marginalized youth.

A causal link between the program intervention and the outcomes described by interviewees cannot be established without use of a control group. Other limitations include the fact that our findings are drawn from one afterschool program in one urban setting and so may not be generalized to other settings. In addition, interviewing only parents and staff excluded the youth. Future research could look for the elements of relational-cultural theory in other settings and could include students’ perspectives.

### Implications for Practice

The quality of the relationships between adults and youth in an afterschool program strongly affects youth engagement and positive outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Jones & Deutsch, 2010). To better address the growing disparity of life outcomes for youth of color who live in poverty, the field needs more empirical descriptions of processes that foster the development of mutual relationships. Relational-cultural theory contributes to this empirical knowledge base by providing a blueprint for meaningful relational connection within the human family. The all-white staff of Project YES successfully cultivated strong, transformative relationships with students of color. Though cultural connections are important in adult-youth relationships, particularly in “majority-minority” settings like Project YES (Deutsch & Jones, 2008, p. 673), our findings suggest that a shared culture based on mutual respect and empathy can transcend a culture defined solely by race and ethnicity or socioeconomic class.

The staff we interviewed revealed an implicit understanding of relational-cultural theory that guided their interactions with Project YES students. Though we discovered some elements of relational-cultural theory in staff interactions with parents, the evidence was not consistently strong in all five areas. In particular, parents did not report that they themselves experienced increased zest or empowerment because of Project YES. Shifting the program’s focus from parent involvement to vital parent engagement could help parents become “citizens in the fullest sense—change agents who can transform urban schools” (Warren & Mapp, 2011, p. 7). Explicitly and intentionally incorporating the elements of relational-cultural theory into program design, training, and evaluation could help achieve this goal. Parent engagement strategies can help to create “a closer cultural match” by providing opportunities for “bidirectional respect” (Deutsch & Jones, 2008, p. 671) based on mutual affiliation and connection.

Afterschool violence prevention programs that build mutual relationships of support, respect, trust, and

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### **Implications for Policy Decisions**

The ability of relational-cultural practices to bridge gaps of age, race, and class has important policy implications.

First, the pressure on afterschool programs to demonstrate academic outcomes, to the exclusion of more holistic goals, must cease. All youth, and particularly those most at risk, need broadly based programming that includes recreation, food, arts, leadership development, team building, field trips, and so on, as well as academic support. These activities build the kind of relational community that will enhance learning and student success in the long term.

Second, “zero tolerance” and other exclusionary discipline policies that disproportionately affect boys of color—including placing students in special education because they have “behavioral issues”—must be challenged and overturned. As a start, students and parents should have more remedies to appeal such decisions and should have access to free legal support provided by the state or federal government. While waiting for appeals, students must be given tutoring or other academic support so they don’t fall behind. Robbing a youth of his education is a virtual guarantee of the success of what Marian Wright Edelman (2011) calls the “cradle to prison pipeline.” Consistent pathways to include high-risk youth, rather than excluding them, must be institutionalized. Such pathways can solidify young people’s self-efficacy and lifelong engagement in healthy relationships. Celebrating students’ gains achieves a similar goal, reinforcing lessons learned in programs like Project YES.

For high-risk youth who live in communities plagued by poverty and violence, afterschool programs must provide a haven that can provide the kind of physical and emotional safety youth need to thrive. Intentionally developing mutual adult-child relationships is one essential cure for “the toxic cocktail of poverty, illiteracy, racial disparities, violence, and massive incarceration” (Edelman, 2011) that derails our young people and contributes to the deterioration of communities and of our nation as a whole.

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