

---

# Freedom Schools for the Twenty-First Century

---

DARI GREEN- LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

## *Abstract*

*This research investigates the organizational and interactional dynamics of a model of community cultural wealth in Freedom Schools. To provide children of color with the knowledge and mentoring required for success in an often racially hostile environment, a variation of grassroots efforts have been created throughout history. During the Civil Rights Era, one of the most prominent avenues for Black youth to receive these services was through the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's creation of Freedom Schools in 1964. These schools combated the lack of attention given to school-aged Black children in educational and social settings. Half a century later much has changed, but much has stayed the same. Children of color continue to lag behind their white counterparts in terms of educational attainment and various other forms of capital from which they are structurally excluded. Although SNCC saw its demise at the completion of the Civil Rights Era, the Children's Defense Fund has continued the original Freedom School curriculum. These schools invite members of underprivileged communities to participate in this program that focuses on building self-esteem, teaching respect, teamwork, conflict resolution, and history with an objective of maintaining and/or developing Black culture. Using in-depth interviews and participant observation, this study found that the Freedom School programs serve as a critical form of community cultural wealth for the youth and parents in an East Baton Rouge neighborhood. The results suggest that research should focus on the role of the program's interns that provide information, support, supervision, and bridges to other forms of capital by way of the Freedom School.*

## *Introduction*

Each morning at the Baton Rouge Freedom School, the day begins with a harambee celebration where the youth join in singing what they call "The Motivational Song." The motivational song's lyrics are from the song, "Something inside So Strong" by Labi Siffre. The student use hand motions while singing, reflecting on the meaning of the words. The children sing and motion: "There's something inside so strong. I know that I can make it, though you're doing me wrong, so wrong. You thought that my pride was gone. Oh no, there's something inside so strong."

These words are meant to empower the youth of the program, encouraging self-esteem, despite the fact that in many ways odds seem stacked against them. Nationwide, African-Americans represent 15% of the population, 26% of juvenile arrests, 44% of youth who are detained, 46% of the youth who are judicially waived to criminal court, and 58% of the youth admitted to state prisons (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 2014). Additionally, Blacks experience a disproportionate rate of unemployment, substance abuse, and violence in this community, as in most urban contexts across the country (Becker, 1997; Kalev, 2014; Velez, Krivo, & Peterson, 2003).



*Dari Green is a doctoral student in the department of Sociology at Louisiana State University. She received her bachelor's in Sociology from Nicholls State University in 2011. Green is a qualitative sociologist with broad interests in race and ethnicity, social inequality, & community sociology. Her empirical research explores current social issues with the intention of contributing to the depth of existing social theories. Her current research focuses on the role of natural mentors in the lives of at-risk African-American youth.*

However, these students begin each day with an affirmation that challenges a system that has historically subjected blacks to subsidiary positions of slavery, employment discrimination, wage discrimination, promotion discrimination, white monopoly discrimination against black capital, and racial price discrimination in consumer goods, housing, and services (Hobbes, 2010; Mills, 1999). The youth are encouraged to maintain hope in life despite that fact that they may never obtain a means to overcome structured inequality. They are encouraged in the Freedom School program through storytelling, the reading of African-American literature, and the relationships that they form with interns (whom I label throughout this piece as mentors), to use specific navigational tools to challenge and/or resist oppressive conditions that the students often face (Yosso, 2005). This research will explore the ways in which the Baton Rouge Freedom School, its curriculum, and mentors promote community cultural wealth within a specific community in Black Baton Rouge.

While hundreds of articles exist that examine the Black community and mentoring, there does not appear to be many, if any, that focus on community cultural wealth that is extended through naturally occurring mentor relationships that are developed through Freedom Schools. Among the predecessors most closely related to the subject matter are those that have viewed coaching as a means of accumulating social capital, those that have developed a theory of "spatial mismatch" for the underclass, those that examine the psychology of Black men, and those that attempt to understand the "cycle of poverty" (Kain, 1993; Richardson, 2012; Wilson, 2009; Young, 2004). Such resources were initially used to guide my field work and define concepts for my data collection. However, after collecting and analyzing data, I found that the Baton Rouge Freedom School fostered the community cultural wealth model, a parallel to mainstream education systems.

### ***Conceptualizing Community Cultural Wealth***

The theory of community cultural wealth is most often used in the context of Critical Race Theory (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Yosso, 2005). It is conceptually a challenge to the traditional understanding of cultural capital which can be found in the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) which discusses in great detail the phenomenon of cultural reproduction from a privileged perspective. Critical race theorists, however, offer a much different discussion on matters of cultural

capital and other forms of capital in communities of color (Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen, 2013; Perez, 2014; Yosso, 2005)

Yosso (2005) adapted the model of community cultural wealth from Oliver and Shapiro (1995) to demonstrate several different forms of capital that are neither mutually exclusive nor static, but build upon one another and are used in communities of color to combat oppression on both macro and micro-levels. There are at least six forms of capital that make up community cultural wealth according to Yosso (2005) which include (1) aspirational capital; (2) navigational capital; (3) social capital; (4) linguistic capital; (5) familial capital; and (6) resistance capital.

1. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes in spite of perceived racial barriers (Yosso, 2005). This form of cultural wealth has been explored in studies that examine the consistently low levels of educational attainment in Hispanic populations, in contrast to the consistently high aspirations for future generations to achieve social mobility (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). This was also found to be the case in the African-American population in the 2014 Baton Rouge Survey conducted by students at Louisiana State University.
2. Linguistic capital includes social skills that are attained through communication in more than one language or style. Yosso (2005) examines the bilingual education within Latino communities as a form of community cultural capital. I contend that dialect and accents are equally important in fostering bonding forms of social capital, linguistic capital and cultural wealth within African-American communities (Putnam, 1995).
3. Familial capital refers to cultural knowledge that is nurtured among kin to carry on a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition (Yosso, 2005). This term is informed by works such as Morris (1999) that addresses communal bonds within African-American communities. The members of the family, in this context, are not limited to immediate family, but includes extended family members or close family friends. This form of capital minimalizes isolation among underprivileged

members, in contrast to what has been examined by Wilson (1987). These family members feel that they are no longer alone in the problems that they face and become connected with others around them that share common issues (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001).

4. Social capital is most simply understood as networks of people and community resources (Putnam, 1995). These resources provide emotional support to navigate through society's institutions. In the context of South Louisiana, African-American networks that have been traditionally known to produce social capital have been the church and social, aid, and pleasure clubs that exist within the community (Dinerstein, 2009; DuBois, 1903).
5. Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering or navigating through social institutions which historically were not created with communities of color in mind and continually permeate racial hostility or inequality (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital acknowledges individual constraints, but it also connects to social networks that facilitate community navigation through places and spaces including schools, the job market, health care, and judicial system (Yosso, 2005).
6. Resistance capital refers to knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality through verbal and non-verbal lessons (Yosso, 2005).

These tenets are all key characteristics that are built into the Baton Rouge Freedom School's curriculum and exercised by servant-leader interns, that help build community cultural wealth. On a large scale, the scholarly literature pertaining to Freedom Schools that are currently in existence focus solely on the Mississippi Freedom Schools that existed during the Civil Rights Era South (Perlstein, 1990). There are various illustrations of liberation techniques used during the Freedom Summer and within Freedom Schools (Etienne, 2013; Street, 2011; Sturkey, 2010).

There is also a small amount of quantitative literature that examines the effectiveness of CDF Freedom Schools that currently exist on the West Coast (Bethea, 2012). No studies to date have examined Freedom Schools using the community cultural wealth model.

This study explores the ways in which people of color utilize the resources that are abundant in their community, though they lack access to White, middle-class resources in many regards. My use of this model is purposed in this paper to acknowledge the Freedom Schools (namely the interns that often play the role of natural mentors) promotion of community cultural wealth, with no intention to suggest further exploitation within underprivileged communities.

### ***Brief Historical Context***

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was the result of an ongoing struggle dating back to the seventeenth century (Jones, 2002). From the struggle to end enslavement to the "War Between the States", African-Americans demonstrated their commitment to the values and principles upon which the country was founded (Rousseau, 2011). The struggle for justice continued even after the Civil War when African-Americans were not only treated as second-class citizens, but were also subjected to lynching, riots, and other forms of violence (Jones, 2002). African-Americans still demonstrated their valor and willingness in battles at home and abroad; overtime claiming many victories. One of the greatest legislative victories came with the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which called for the integration of schools with all deliberate speed (Bell, 1995).

However, as was the case in the past, change did not come quickly. African Americans continued to face obstacles in their desire to receive a quality education and in other areas of public life (Bell, 1995). Jim Crow laws during the 1960s were the means of exclusion in many social and educational settings, which caused community members to rely on churches, teachers, extended family members, and at the time organizations such as the Freedom School's original founder, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Etienne, 2013). Even in its infancy, African American Civil Rights leaders recognized that there was a need to reawaken the consciousness of the nation and the world and many felt Freedom Summer provided such an opportunity. It was not until the 1964 "Freedom Summer" campaign that some African-Americans began to participate politically or seek intellectual freedom aside from public education offered by the state (Sturkey, 2010).

One project that was a result of the Freedom Summer was the Freedom School, which in the summer of

1964 could be found throughout the state of Mississippi (Emery, Brasselmann, & Gold, 2010). Many college-aged students facilitated this program in an effort to empower black students academically, socially, and politically. According to the commemorative SNCC Freedom School website (Emery, 2010) the goal was to promote the following principles: (1) The school as an agent of social change, (2) students knowing their own history, (3) the (academic) curriculum being linked to the student's experience, (4) asking open-ended questions, and (5) stressing the necessity of developing academic skills (Edelman, 2014). As Charles Cobb puts it: "the (freedom) schools tackled history and civics, encouraged creativity, and made continual successful efforts to get the students to believe in themselves and their ability; to see that the world of possibilities and opportunities was not 'for whites only'" (Cobb, 2010).

While the original program was SNCC founded and located in Mississippi, today the Children's Defense Fund, in partnership with many of the same institutions utilized in the 1960s (i.e. faith institutions, schools, colleges and universities, and community based organizations) offers similar services to today's youth in underprivileged communities across the United States (Children's Defense Fund, 2014).

Even prior to the civil rights era, Black youth programs and organizations were known to be organized by people of color and intended to reach children of color from many different age brackets and with diverse interests (Cook, 1940). In its origin, the SNCC Freedom School program had several different functions and intentions. One of the main focuses, though offering basic educational remedial courses was of utmost importance, was to introduce African American heritage to the youth through a sophisticated cultural program (Street, 2011). While the youth were most heavily targeted in this, the curriculum was designed with the assumption that all generations could learn from and teach one another. (Street, 2011).

While these goals were important, the 1964 Freedom Schools were also intended to keep Black children and youth out of harm's way, namely racist acts that were occurring in 1964 Mississippi. Similarly, the CDF Freedom School programs focus on keeping youth out of harm's way within their neighborhoods and serves not only as alternative to inner-city street life, but counteracts systemic racism as well (Edmonds, 2014; Richardson, 2012). Whereas changing policy was once the center-focus in the formation of the Freedom Summer programs, today's programs continue to challenge the structural barriers that are in place, though policies

may have changed (Edelman, 2014). Today's Freedom School programs, like those found in the summer of 1964, attempt to counteract negative forces often found in inner-city environments through storytelling, cultural events, and mentorship (Lauer, Anthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006). As the data that I collected will show, it is important to recognize the ability for Freedom School to act as an agency that fosters community cultural wealth, though the responsibility actually falls on individuals within the organization.

One may question, then, if the 1964 Freedom School model was a good one, why, then, did it discontinue? An answer to this is that SNCC itself eventually came to an end because though it had not lacked in "transforming participants enough," it lacked in "transforming enough participants." (Street, 2011). This grassroots struggle took place during the Civil Rights Movement where police torture, Klan firebombs, liberal betrayal, and murder were not absent from the cause (Edmonds, 2014). However, as the data that I collected will show, it is important to recognize the ability for today's Freedom Schools to act as an agency that fosters community cultural wealth.

### *Natural Mentors as Agents of Community Cultural Wealth*

Many of the networks and forms of capital that are promoted in the Freedom School program are facilitated by the servant leader interns that act as natural mentors to students in the program. The role of a natural mentor can be broadly conceptualized, as mentors may be extended kin, those found in informal networks (e.g. neighbors and coaches), or even formal networks (e.g. teachers, tutors, and counselors) (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Natural mentoring that has occurred within the Freedom Schools, both then and now, has largely been a result of intergenerational bonds that form between the teachers and students within the program (Street, 2011). As a former youth participant in the 1964 SNCC Freedom School program described it: "there is a joining of a young generation of people with an older generation that nurtures and sustains them" (Payne, 1995).

These naturally occurring mentoring relationships that form between the teachers and students are crucial to the development of community cultural wealth especially in its development of resistance capital. As Ogbu & Wilson (1990) suggested in more formal mentorship institutions, racial minority are best matched with mentors of the same race who have experience in combating

racism in the United States of America. While the CDF Freedom School program is much more grassroots in its development, they are offering these very services. Often times these programs, which serve as a safe haven for the youth in the community that are involved, are uniquely designed to be taught by college students from the communities where the youth live and who look like them, because as the CDF Freedom School president put it: "It's hard to be what you can't see" for many of the children in these communities (Edelman, 2014).

### **Methodology**

The data presented in this paper were collected as a part of a larger longitudinal and ethnographic study of natural mentoring and informal programs that foster these relationships in New Orleans, La, Baton Rouge, La, and Chicago, IL. I became knowledgeable of the Baton Rouge Freedom School program during a community engagement project linked to this study. Mentors in this program were characterized by their efficacy, and their belief in the ability to make a difference in the lives of program participants. I did a cross-sectional examination of interactions among people, processes, and activities and systematically monitored what mentors and youth did, how mentoring relationships developed over time, how mentors taught behaviors, and how youths learned behaviors.

Suspension of knowledge gathered prior to the study was necessary before entering the field of research. As a Louisiana native, I am familiar with many people and places that offer formal and informal mentoring services in the South Louisiana region. I contacted several community leaders that work within low income communities and I defined the characteristics that would constitute a successful mentor and program, mainly, effectively keeping children from delinquent behavior. While doing research in the New Orleans area, I was introduced to the site coordinator of the Baton Rouge Freedom School. The coordinator and I communicated via telephone and e-mail for about a month, which allowed me to build rapport.

During our next meeting she and the other servant-leaders were already familiar with my study and we began interviews. The bulk of the data presented in this paper were taken from transcriptions of interviews with the BRFS leaders, parents, and students. Each interview was formatted to take approximately an hour to complete. However, due to the nature of in-depth studies, the time of the interviews varied in length depending

on the respondents and additional subject matter they introduced. Each conversation was audio recorded, others also incorporated video.

I completed in-depth interviews with twelve people associated with the Baton Rouge Freedom School program over the course of one year. Five of the participants were mentors, five students, and two parents (or guardians) of the students that were interviewed. These members were chosen because they were identified by the site coordinator as those leaders, parents, and students that had been the longest continuing participants in the program. There was no compensation provided for any of the interviews. All of the participants self-identified as African-American and all names used are pseudonyms.

While I began the study with the presumption that the servant-leaders took the role of natural mentors in the Freedom School program, I used the Constant Comparative Method to discover the theory during my analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I used NVIVO software to code my data, identifying themes that I interpreted as important in the processes and experiences at the Baton Rouge Freedom School. I was then able to narrow these themes into subthemes, and found that many of these tenets were preexisting in the community cultural wealth model.

### **Baton Rouge Freedom School background**

The Freedom School program that I focus on in this paper is located Baton Rouge, La. The leaders in the program strategically target literacy skills and promote social advocacy and self-confidence among at-risk students (Emery, Brasselmann, & Gold, 2010). Within the surrounding neighborhood of the program I visited, like many inner-city African-American neighborhoods, there is a plague of high unemployment rates, a large number of high school dropouts, violent behaviors, and deteriorating infrastructures (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). In this portion of the city over one third (38%) of the target population lived in poverty, more than double the Louisiana rate. One-quarter of these households were led by single parents. Additionally, only 65% of the adults in the zip code were high school graduates, significantly lower than the 81% of high school graduate level adults in the city of Baton Rouge.

There is a small body of qualitative literature which suggests that organized programs such as that of the Freedom Schools, allow youth to develop relationships and networks with adults within the community who can

potentially extend better life choices to them (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). When the youth are socially engaged with other individuals as a result of being a part of these organizations, they have the opportunity to build trust and information channels that support successful development during adolescent years (Putnam, 1995). The relationships that are formed result in the extension of community cultural wealth. It is important to note that just as its predecessors, the Baton Rouge Freedom School, is a free program located on church property based in the heart of the community it serves. The program is run for a six week period, with each week focusing on different themes relating to the child's self, family, community, American society, extending to the world. Like the SNCC Freedom Schools the program focuses on African and African-American history and culture but incorporates it in a way that is directed to the needs of the children in a current societal context. The youth read books and participate in activities and field trips that they can relate to in their lives.

While this is the case, the curriculum used over fifty years ago is still applied. The children are challenged by the use of open-ended questioning, to name "the power structure" and analyze how it works by use of the following guiding questions: (1) What does the majority culture have that they want? (2) What does the majority culture have that they don't want? (3) What do they have that they want to keep (Emery, Braselmann, & Gold, 2010)? The students are welcomed into the program without testing, which many find to be intimidating due to state screenings which have held many of them back in the public school system. They are encouraged by the mentors to close the educational gap, but it is stressed that the ultimate goal is not to regurgitate or memorize facts from a book, rather to relate the information to life experiences.

### *Daily Activities*

Each morning the students begin with the Harambee (coming together) celebration. The students then spend time reading in small classes broken up into three age appropriate "levels." The students engage in activities throughout the day that relate to the content of the books that they have read. The staff, additionally, uses parables to apply principles found in the reading material to the lives of the students. Students, then, all participate in a half hour of activity where they "drop everything and read," before having an hour of lunch and play. At the end of the hour students are rounded

up for class, by the beat of drums and a few chants, before being led back to classes where they participate in activities such as writing poetry or practicing theatrics. The last two hours are spent playing sports, games, or doing arts and crafts. This ritual is continued throughout the six week program and a finale is coordinated at the completion of the program to allow the youth to showcase what they have learned to their parents and community.

### *Findings*

Participants in this study discussed many of the ways that the Baton Rouge Freedom School and the servant leader interns helped them to develop and use culturally relevant knowledge and skills to resist racial barriers and excel academically. The findings are presented within each tenet of the community cultural wealth model.

### *Aspirational capital*

Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams despite inequality and the means to achieve those dreams (Yosso, 2005). Although many of the interview participants consistently acknowledged that there were many social barriers that prevented them from easily maneuvering their way through mainstream culture, the majority of them maintained high aspirations for social change and/or mobility. As the site coordinator, Farrah, explains:

"We're looking to help them pinpoint what their purpose is, because if I know what I'm here for, I am not going to be as easily distracted by gangs, drugs, and just common misbehavior, because I'm focused on something... I have something I'm going after; versus I'm just aimlessly wandering around trying to figure out where I fit. So anybody can tell me that this is what I'm supposed to do because I grew up in this neighborhood, or this is what I'm supposed to do because I come from this type of family."

Many of the participants, including mentors grew up in the surrounding areas of the Freedom School. Several of them described the families and children that participated in the program as those who had come from poverty and many of them from single-parent homes. Though many of them lived in adverse living

conditions, Freedom School was there to assist them in pinpointing a purpose and pursuing it. They charged the students to have higher goals and aspirations than they began with upon entering the program, being a great motivating source.

An additional interview with one of the students, Alaina (12), revealed her perspective about forms of aspirational capital that the program extended to her. She took quite a few minutes to draw some images on a whiteboard to express her feelings. The main picture was the symbol of a heart. Within the heart were the words: hope, pursue, passion, and dreams. There was a picture of an anchor drawn in the center of this all. When asked to explain the meaning of the images, she stated, while pointing at each item:

“For pursue we always pursue our goals, basically. And whatever we say we’re gonna accomplish, we end up accomplishing. For passion the teachers have passion towards us as the students. For dreams, like I said, we always follow them no matter what. This anchor, it means we are strong in the heart and we can hold everything to down and we always hope! So... (Shrugs shoulders).”

Alaina spoke about her increasing aspirations, as a result of participating in the Freedom School program. She expressed her understanding of the need to set goals, to ultimately accomplish them. In the center of the statements about goals and dreams, this student discusses the role that the teachers (mentors) play in maintaining high aspirations. The mentors are passionate towards the students, their goals, and education, a stark contrast to the hostility often found in their mainstream education system. As a result, this student expressed the strength that the program gave her to maintain hope in spite of adversity.

This student’s mother, Aisha, expressed similar views about how she felt the Freedom School positively influenced her children and explained why she had chosen to place her children in this particular program:

“Umm if she can see that I can be a Black student that can go to college and have an education. I can be a young lady that can start my own foundation and have a program. Or I can own my own business. Or I can teach dance. I can teach other kids how to do things. That’s what I want her to be involved in. To see that you can do whatever you wanna do, you just have to put your mind to it.”

Alaina’s mother expresses the ways that she believes Freedom School promotes higher aspirations for

her daughter. In this quote she refers to the college-age interns that mentor her child, the site coordinator that began this particular program, and all of the other affiliates that have influenced her daughter throughout her time in the program. She suggests that they are not an exception to the rule, rather she expresses her belief (in unison with her daughter) that whatever Alaina wants to do she can, if she aspires it enough.

### *Navigational capital*

Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering or navigating through racially hostile social institutions (Yosso, 2005). The participants in this study constantly expressed their belief that the best form of navigational capital for youth of low socioeconomic status were those skills transferred through grassroots efforts such as the Baton Rouge Freedom School. It was the first description of the Freedom School given to me by Farrah:

“We are not the top-down organization. Grassroots... this means we are starting at the most basic level of growth, which is just grass (laughs).”

The coordinator before mentioning what they were, mentioned what they were not. Top-down organizations typically are hierarchical in their formation and are commanded by those highest in rank. These grassroots efforts are opposite these traditional power structures, in that they are organic and deal with the need of participants on a more individual basis.

When asked about why this method was effective for these youth in her opinion, an intern, Tessa, stated:

“My vote will always be for grassroots because those are the people that had probably live that life. They know most first to hand... it’s not what they are reading about from books or reports like that. You see it and you know the problems that they have. Grassroots is more close-knit, it’s more home based; these are your kids in your neighborhood you’re trying to do better for.”

This mentor goes into more detail about why she felt that this method was most beneficial for these kids. She, again, contrasts the techniques used by those in top-down and grassroots organizations. Books and reports cannot fully capture or bring solutions to the problems experienced by these children. She suggests that those that understand the ways of the immediate neighborhood are better equip to help these students navigate the system around them.

Farrah continued in her conversation, stating her philosophy on why grassroots was the way to go.

“We have cool ideas about how to revolutionize our community, how to serve these kids in radical approaches to education. Not just saying we want to teach, but actually being taught; and not saying we want to do the work but actually serving them; not just saying ‘somebody should stabilize them’ but actually being the anchor that stabilizes our community.”

Farrah explains her philosophy as one of “doing” versus “being.” The interns believe that they are able to learn as much from the students and families involved in the program, as they are able to teach. She focuses on the serving the children, families, and surrounding community by providing a program that extends educational resources to these groups. She futhered her statement, adding:

“Policy is important; changing that is important; legislation is important; advocacy is definitely important and that is something that we look for. But after we have done the advocating, after we’ve gone to legislators, there still has to be someone who gets down to business and does the work and that’s what a grass-roots effort is. We get the parents involved. Nobody else needs to... stop looking to other people to make a change. You be the change. Parents you have to come to the parent meetings, community leaders you have to take this program in and do something about it. Stop looking to outside sources.”

Farrah continually expressed her belief that change in the community starts within. Expressing her frustration and admiration in the same breath, Farrah acknowledges the structural inequality in the American system and explains why grassroots efforts are the best form of navigational capital in her opinion. She went on to explain that each of these levels of service “work complementary to one another” and that policy change is equally as important as the grassroots effort, but continually focused on self-empowerment.

An additional intern, Shama spoke about the importance of these programs and the relationships and networks that develop outside of them to help children in the community.

“Grassroots program like this are something that’s very organic and homegrown. It’s very important for these kids because these are people that you’re

going to see at the grocery store, these are people that you’re going to see in school... ‘Hey Miss Shana I saw you at the mall...’ These are people that you not only see being positive role models in the classroom but you also see them outside of the classroom. I think just that difference of that personal, intimate relationship just makes the world of difference in the student’s lives.”

Unlike more formal mentoring programs, the Baton Rouge Freedom School employs members of the surrounding community in its program. These students are able to interact with the mentors on a day-to-day basis in social settings outside of the program. The relationships thus exist over long durations of time and are not limited to the six weeks that the program actually runs. This intern explains the necessity of having these less formal ties to natural mentors in the lives of the students that participate.

Though many of the present social institutions were not historically created with communities of color in mind and therefore continually permeate racial hostility or inequality, Freedom School offers an alternative route to education and networks that teach children of color effective ways to maneuver through these systems. The organization teaches ways to navigate through education systems (by improving reading and having interns that are college students), teaching students about the job market, proper etiquette, and successfully keeping many of them from street life and the penal system.

### *Social capital*

Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources (Yosso 2005). Social capital was another common theme that participants alluded to in several of the interviews. While speaking to Aisha about mentoring opportunities she received as a child she replied:

“My summers were filled just at my grandmother’s house. I wasn’t in programs. I didn’t get to be around other kids and experience how to share and grow and to see people that... of my... you know... of who I am growing up and saying I wanna be like you. I didn’t get that. I watched TV and hey I wanted to be like the person on TV. Or I saw this person... I didn’t have people in my community saying hey let’s encourage each other and build each other up. My parents just didn’t get me involved like that.”

This parent expresses her belief that the relationships that her child formed with other children encouraging sharing and growing were of value to her. Additionally, having community members that were encouraging and building one another up was something she definitely wanted her child to be a part of. The children, however, were not the only beneficiaries of social capital in the program.

Due to children participation, the parents also receive benefits of social capital. One of the largest emphasis in the Baton Rouge Freedom School program was on creating opportunities for parents to be able to be involved in the educational processes of the children. During the summer and afterschool there were meetings that extended information to parent's about communication and proper forms of discipline, how to affirm children and relieve stress. There were also events such as family game night, classes on healthy eating (in which everyone was involved in preparing it and eating it together) and many other resources that helped strengthen the connection of the parents in the program with their children.

One participant, Grace, spoke about the importance of certain resources that were extended to the parents in these programs:

"We talk about what's going on in the educational community. In Louisiana there've been a lot of school takeovers. We have more charter schools than we have ever had before because schools are failing and the parents, in our community especially, did not know that they had options, that if their children are attending failing schools, to take their child out of the school and have them be placed somewhere else. So we try to educate them on those things."

The parents were able to get information concerning their children's more formal educational settings, from this community-based program. By participating in these activities, parents received information about how to navigate their way through a changing educational system. Farrah explains how these channels are intended to contribute to the lives of the parents and students involved:

"They teach me more than I could ever teach them. They provide for me more than I could ever dream of providing for them. So this is my service for them making sure that they have services that they need to flourish. It might not be me and I'm OK with that but I know what my part is. My part is to

be here so you (referring to youth) can never say 'no one ever told me that this is how I'm supposed to dress,' 'no one told me that I could do more than what I'm doing right now, because all I've seen around me is devastation.' You can't say no one took you out of your neighborhood and showed you other options."

Farrah explains some of the intangible resources that are offered to the students in the program. Communicating, proper etiquette, and showing students a reality beyond the hostile environments that many of them come from, extends life choices and chances to participants that they may not have had otherwise.

### *Linguistic capital*

"Freeze what's your name and where your book at?"

Chant, Baton Rouge Freedom School Participants

Linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style (Yosso 2005). Children in the program often used poetry, rap and plays as a form of expression. While teachers were concerned about reading and writing in standard American-English, many forms of expression used Ebonics and Black English. Many of the chants that encouraged academic engagement, themselves, used alternative forms of speaking that Black children could relate to. Farrah explained the usefulness of this and when she considered these actions to be deemed to appropriate.

"With the interns we tell them to watch the language they use in front of the student. Of course everybody gets relaxed 'hey man what's going on' and everything and that's fine, but when you're in your classroom you want to speak clearly."

Instead of devaluing the student's forms of expression, she suggests instead to teach the student the proper place and time for speaking Standard English. Code switching is an important part of being culturally flexible and successfully navigating through mainstream culture while maintaining one's identity (Carter 2010). Jasmine (12) adds:

"There are different types of ways you can learn. If I can impart it to somebody... The love of reading... There's so much you can learn from reading."

While, she participates in cheers and chants that may utilize an alternative dialect, she encourages stu-

dents to read books that expand their knowledge base. One student extended this discussion on the linguistic capital. She expressed that the interns informed her that it was not necessarily the form of expression that was of most importance, rather it was what was being expressed.

“They teach you to be yourself and not anyone else...Just because 2Chainz is rapping, you don’t have to rap. You can go sing and dance if you want to...They made me not talk too much, but when I talk I say things that mean something. Instead of talking the most and saying the least, it’s talking the least and saying the most.”

Her reference to 2Chainz, who is a celebrity that is well-known in many urban black communities, was interesting. This celebrity could have become a role model for her as for many youth in inner-city populations, through his messages that are often associated with drugs, sex, and violence expressed through foul language. Instead, this student internalized the information extended to her by the natural mentors that she encounters at Freedom that encourage critical thinking and expression in a more strategic way.

### ***Familial capital***

Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among kin that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition (Yosso 2005). Several of the participants expressed that the bonds formed within the program caused many students and parents that may have not been connected by blood, to consider one another as family, over time. One specific example surfaced during a group interview with Aisha, Jasmine, and Alaina. The girls set closely and explained to me the impact that they believed the program had on their friendship.

Alaina: “We met through Freedom School a long time ago. At first she (referring to Jasmine) was shy but then we became friends, best friends...”

Jasmine: “Actually we are more like sisters, we do everything together. Her mom and my mom are friends now too, so we are always together. They are my second family.”

Jasmine references a familial tie to Alaina and her family. Though not bound by blood, a familial bond is nurtured between these two girls due to the common

culture and community that the girls share at the Baton Rouge Freedom School.

This program focuses not only on building ties to alternative kinship ties, but sees the traditional family structure as one of significant importance in the lives of their participants. As Farrah explains:

“You hear it said ‘I’m a product of my environment.’ Well your first environment is your home and no matter what else is going on outside of it, you spend the a majority of your time in your home. So wherever you go you’re taking that with you. The work that we’re trying to do is create the family.”

Farrah expresses the need for a stable home environment. She believes that while she can be of assistance consistently during the six week summer program, the families and homes of the children are their first source of agency. The program, therefore, attempts to build the family units that the children come from and ultimately return to.

Although this is the case, the interns are well-aware of the challenges that many of the families face and often play surrogate roles in the lives of the children that participate in the program.

“We have a lot of kids that come from poverty we have a lot of kids that come from a neighborhood like this where there’s not a lot of two-parent homes, there is not a lot of stability...so in the summer this a place for them to come and get away from all of that and to be in a loving nurturing environment.”

There are certain social problems that often accompany poverty. While the program seeks to build the immediate families of the children and foster relationships between participants, they also make themselves available as nonparent adult figures that often equally influence the youth that participate in the program.

### ***Resistance capital***

Brothers and sisters

When they insist we’re just not good enough

Well we know better

Just look ‘em in the eyes and say

We’re gonna do it anyway

BRFS participants, Daily Motivational Song

Resistance capital, or the challenging of inequity or subordination, was a common theme among program leaders and participants, as noted in the lyrics of the daily motivational song. During several of the open-ended interviews, leaders described what they perceived to be stereotypical views of the students and families that were associated with the program and resisted such labels.

Farrah expressed her perception of inequity as her motivation for beginning the program:

“It bothers me when people are treated fairly when they are not given a chance. Everyone should at least be given a chance. What you do with that chance is completely up to you, but I feel like it’s our job or our responsibility to give everybody a least a fair playing field where they have a chance.”

Farrah enters this conversation with an understanding that not all children will accept the help being extended to them, but insists that the children be given a level playing field anyway. She suggests that for the poor the outcomes are often merely a reflection of what is being input into the lives of the children and families.

An intern, Lisa, insisted that the children that participated in the program did quite well socially and academically when they were provided the opportunity.

“Even now [after the six-week duration of the summer program] I still see kids that were in my class, and it’s always like a breath of fresh air to see them in school and to see them learning, to see them still engaging in school work... Seeing them...you know... good kids that didn’t fall to their environment.”

Lisa encourages the children to resist the street culture, while also propagating a resistance to mainstream labels that label children from inner-city, impoverished neighborhoods as subordinate. She counters such labels using words such as “learning,” “engaging,” and “good kids that haven’t fallen to their environment.” The connotation of the word fall implies a loss of power or control that she believes that the youth actually possess.

The Freedom School also has a booklist comprised of approximately 80 titles. The majority of the books listed, speak to experiences that have been historically faced by communities of color. These stories offer resistance capital to the students as well, or as Shama put it:

“The teachers are not just standing up there

teaching about a lesson in a book. They’re not just: ‘Hey, let’s read this and I’ll ask you a couple of questions.’ These are life lessons that they are teaching these kids that they can carry on with them for years and years.”

The books that the children read are fiction and nonfiction accounts of people of color that have navigated their way through a structurally unequal system. Whereas many of the students have been taught in their traditional school systems how to take a test intended to measure intelligence, these teachers emphasize using knowledge to overcome the tests of life.

### *Conclusion*

Like SNCC’s Freedom School model that dates back a half-century ago, the Baton Rouge Freedom School promotes community cultural wealth among participants (Etienne, 2013). Youth that were involved in the Baton Rouge Freedom Schools developed a social consciousness and turned away from street activities, leaning more toward education, even if in a nontraditional manner. Through art, poetry, theater, and other cultural forms the children who participate in the programs discover ways to express themselves and while inviting them into a setting with others like them, suggests that there is more that can be afforded to them that what they see in their immediate area.

This CDF Freedom School program is attractive because they are free of cost and are made of up youth and leaders from similar backgrounds. Like its SNCC founded forefather, it is able to motivate Black children by providing history and the achievements of their ancestors making change seem attainable in their lives, even if that means creating parallel institutions to do so (Sturkey, 2010). When reading novels with characters that they are able to identify with and discussing similar obstacles that they face in life, the children learn to express feelings of hurt in a positive manner which motivates them to develop themselves and contribute to social change. It is common knowledge that economically disadvantaged Blacks are commonly challenged by structural barriers in the labor market and housing markets. As a result they can experience severe isolation and can sometime gravitate toward street behavior as a method of survival. This research shows however that as community cultural capital is fostered, their life choices may become much greater.

Individuals who participated in this program under-

stood the importance having positive role models within the community that the youth could trust and mimic. By expressing words of affirmation and incorporating chants and songs that were also uplifting the children are able to internalize messages of positivity that build their self-esteem. Though it is not uncommon to find poor people portrayed in media as devalued persons, the individuals in this program stress that every life has a purpose and attempts to fan into flame the potential in each child. The relationships between the children and adults in these programs are built on a strong level of trust because the children are not asked solely to perform academically, though scholarship is not totally dismissed. The relationships with the individuals in the program are consistent, children are able to see these mentors while in the program but also see them interacting in the community as leaders.

The relationships between the mentors and mentees also extend to the families of the children where the trust is reinforced. Due to the obligation that many of the mentors share in the desire to advocate for equity in the lives of the mentees, they learn to trust the resources extended to them by the mentors (Loury, 1987; Fukuyama, 1995). They begin to desire the stability, supervision, and exposure that the mentors bring. These adults become strong sources of social capital for the youths in this inner-city neighborhood. Whether by content found in the books that are read by the classes or personal lessons passed down by mentors, children are able to learn how to combat real world problems without succumbing to delinquency. The youth learn conflict resolution and alternatives to fighting or taking the lives of others. As one participant described it, "it made him feel different."

The youth involved in the program learn how to set and achieve goals, and are able to do this in a social space where they feel nurture and protection being given by those who are like them. They are individuals from the same neighborhood, who are in similar situations financially, who have also lived lives of poverty, but made it their life mission to protect the following generations from the street, as well as disappointments that can come from the mainstream racial hostility. In doing

this the mentors also require parental participation and also offer tools to better the family unit. While the mentors would desire to be with each child for long periods of time and keep them from harm, the reality that they are neither omnipresent nor omnipotent sets in and they attempt to build trust and cooperation within the homes of the children, where they spend most of their time.

The lessons that are being taught to the children in the program are expected to be taught in homes and passed down from one generation to another. As some mentees expressed, there is a strong desire to pass on the same messages of hope to their children and even friends that they meet in the community. The youth are shown how to use their speech in a positive way- to meet new people and learn new things. These are elements important in both bridging (interethnic) and bonding (intra-ethnic) forms of social capital (Putnam, 1995).

The data presented suggests that grassroots efforts and natural mentoring relationships of this sort should be further researched, perhaps through longitudinal studies. This study is limited in the information that it provides about these relationships and they deserve much more attention. While this research explores positive elements of this program and these relationships, it would be interesting to understand negative aspects as well (e.g. funding, methods of discipline, etc.). This research additionally suggests that mentoring practices should be directed to the needs of the current societal context as defined by trends in demography, historical events and evolving communities and those concepts and practices should be adapted to meet the changing needs and circumstances of people in our society (Baker, 2005). I would like to argue that even such small successes can produce cumulative changes that result in a more stable community in the long run (Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould, 2009). While community cultural wealth alone cannot guard against all systemic or personal barriers, various forms of capital used to navigate these challenges are important to everyday persistence and are too often overlooked. This research suggests that community cultural wealth deserves greater emphasis in the education of minority youth, as opposed

to traditional measures of cultural capital that devalues them.

## References

- Baker, D. (2005). Mentoring in Historical Perspective. In D. DuBois, & M. Karcher, *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (pp. 14-29). Thousand Oaks : Sage. Becker, H. (1997). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York : Free Press.

- Bernard, T., Snipes, J., & Gerould, A. (2009). *Vold's Theoretical Criminology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bethea, S. L. (2012). The Impact of Oakland Freedom School's Summer Youth Program on the Psychosocial Development of African American Youth. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 442-454.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. London: Sage.
- Children's Defense Fund. (2014, August 25). *CDF Freedom Schools® Program*. Retrieved from Children's Defense Fund : <http://www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/freedom-schools/>
- Cobb, C. (2010, December 8). For Whites Only. (L. Etienne, Interviewer)
- Cook, L. (1940). Informal and nonschool agencies for the education of Negro youth: A critical summary. *Journal of Negro Education*, 435-439.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (2001). *The power of community: mobilizing for family and schooling*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Derrick Bell, J. (1995). Brown v. Board of Education and Interest Convergence Dilemma. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (pp. 20-28). New York: The New Press.
- Dinerstein, J. (2009). Second Lining Post-Katrina: Learning Community from the Prince of Wales Social Aid and Pleasure Club. *American Quarterly*, 615-637.
- Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau, C. K. (Eds.). (2006). *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God's Children Got a Song*. New York: Routledge.
- DuBois, D., & Silverthorn, N. (2005). Research Methodology. In D. DuBois, & M. Karcher, *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (pp. 44-64). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- DuBois, W. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co. .
- Edelman, M. (2014, May 16). *From Freedom Summer to Freedom Schools*. Retrieved from Huffington Post: [www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/from-freedom-summer-to-fr\\_b\\_5340364.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/from-freedom-summer-to-fr_b_5340364.html)
- Edmonds, M. (Ed.). (2014). *Risking Everything: A Freedom Summer Reader*. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society.
- Emery, K. (2010, November 29). *Freedom School Curriculum: Mississippi 1964*. Retrieved June 15, 2014, from Education and Democracy: [http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/A\\_02\\_Introduction.htm](http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/A_02_Introduction.htm)
- Emery, K., Brasselmann, S., & Gold, L. (2010, November 29). *Introduction*. Retrieved from Freedom Summer and the Freedom Schools: [http://educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/A\\_02\\_Introduction.htm](http://educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/A_02_Introduction.htm)
- Etienne, L. (2013). A Different Type of Summer Camp: SNCC, Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, and the Development of African American Males in Mississippi. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 449-463.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Hobbes, T. (2010). *Leviathan: or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*. (I. Shapiro, Ed.) New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Jarrett, R., Sullivan, P., & Watkins, N. (2005). Developing social capital through participation in organized youth programs: Qualitative insights from three programs. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 41-55.
- Jayakumar, U., Vue, R., & Allen, W. (2013). Pathways to College for Young Black Scholars: A Community Cultural Wealth Perspective. *Harvard Educational Review*, 551-579.
- Jones, B. (2002). Critical Race Theory: New Strategies for Civil Rights in the New Millenium. *Harvard Black Letter Law Journal*, 1-90.
- Kain, J. (1993). The Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis: Three Decades Later. *Housing Policy Debate*, 371-460.
- Kalev, A. (2014). How You Downsize Is Who You Downsize: Biased Formalization, Accountability, and Managerial Diversity. *American Sociological Review*, 109-135.
- Lauer, P., Anthorp, S., Snow, D., & Martin-Glenn, M. (2006). Out -of-school-time program: A meta-analysis of effects for at-risk students. *Review of Educational Research*, 275-313.
- Mills, C. (1999). *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Morris, J. (1999). A pillar of strength: an African-American school's communal bonds with families and communities since Brown. *Urban Education*, 584-605.
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (2014, August 25). *Criminal Justice Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>
- Ogbu, J., & Jr., J. W. (1990). *Mentoring minority youth: a framework*. New York : Columbia University.
- Oliver, M., & Shapiro, T. (1995). *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- Payne, C. (1995). *I've Got the Light of Freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Perez, D. (2014). Exploring the nexus between community cultural wealth and the academic and social experiences of Latino male achievers at two predominantly White research universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)*, 747-767.

- Perlstein, D. (1990). Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools. *History of Education Quarterly*, 310.
- Putnam, R. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 65-78.
- Richardson, J. (2012). Beyond the Playing Field: Coaches as Social Capital for Inner-City Adolescent African-American Males. *Journal of African American Studies*, 171-194.
- Rousseau, N. (2011). *Black Woman's Burden: Commodifying Black Reproduction*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Sampson, R., & Wilson, W. (1995). *Toward a Theory of Race, Crime, and Urban Inequality*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Siffre, L. (1989). (Something Inside) So Strong. On *So Strong* [CD]. Germany: G. Johns.
- Street, J. (2011). Spreading Ripples: SNCC and social capital in the civil rights era South. *European Journal of American Culture*, 195-215.
- Sturkey, W. (2010). I Want to Become a Part of History: Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, and the Freedom News. *Journal of African American History*, 348-368.
- Velez, M., Krivo, L., & Peterson, R. (2003). Structural Inequality and Homicide: An Assessment of the Black-White Gap in Killings. *Criminology*, 645-672.
- Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, W. J. (2009). *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 69-91.
- Young, A. (2004). *The minds of marginalized black men: Making of mobility, opportunity, and future life chances*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Copyright of Western Journal of Black Studies is the property of Washington State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.