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Fulfilling Their Dreams: Marginalized Urban Youths' Perspectives on a Culturally Sensitive Social and Emotional Learning Program

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research suggests educators need to focus on cultivating social and emotional competencies that youth will need to thrive in the new knowledge economy (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). For marginalized urban youth, in particular, few have derived programs and interventions to assist with these competencies. This study illuminates the perspectives of 9 African American youth at risk for academic failure taking part in the Fulfill the Dream (FTD) program. FTD is a social and emotional learning curriculum emphasizing social justice and critical consciousness through the utilization of hip-hop culture. Information regarding the nature of the collaboration of this research project and recommendations for education professionals working with marginalized youth are discussed.

Across the nation, youth are increasingly finding themselves in circumstances that make it difficult for them to succeed in formalized education (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). The number of educationally marginalized youth is rising, as is the intensity of the disadvantage (Pasco, 2003). The current national high school graduation rate continues to hover between 65% and 70% in urban communities, suggesting that approximately one third of urban youth do not complete high school (Finnan & Chasin, 2007). These youth, often categorized as marginalized or at risk, drop out of school for a variety of reasons—including ineffective education, poverty, mental health concerns, and lack of supportive adults—that prevent them from achieving their full academic potential. These students are underserved in a system that often does not recognize their assets or meet their educational and emotional needs by including the social realities that these youth are facing into their school experience. Although many states, districts, and individual high schools have attempted to find solutions to the problem of students dropping out, there has been little success in producing meaningful changes in academic achievement for marginalized students (Watson, 2011).

Some scholars (Benson, 2006; Lerner, Taylor, & von Eye, 2002; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003) believe that psychological interventions designed to empower marginalized youth are ineffective because the pedagogical methods used to try to reach these students do not engage them. Pittman and Fleming (1991) argued that instead of seeing youth as problems needing to be fixed, youth should be viewed as asset-rich agents capable of making positive change. They called for the adoption of a *positive youth development* (PYD) model for working with youth that includes identifying and cultivating youths' skills and assets, rather than focusing on remediating. This movement of introducing positive psychology into schools through a PYD framework was

further developed as researchers documented how the promotion of youth assets increased student academic achievement (Scales & Leffert, 2004).

Researchers have added to the PYD framework by more carefully examining the importance of cultivating skills necessary for youth achievement in school. One of the most significant additions has been the concept of *social and emotional learning* (SEL), an approach focused on enhancing youth interpersonal and intrapersonal skills for success in and out of the classroom (Durlak et al., 2011). However, little has been focused on meeting the psychological and educational needs of marginalized youth. In light of this, many have called for an increase in culturally responsive and adaptive SEL intervention programming (Blanco-Vega, Castro-Olivo, & Merrell, 2008; Garner, Mahatmya, Brown, & Vesely, 2014).

In response to this call, the Fulfill the Dream (FTD) program was created as an SEL curriculum designed for marginalized urban youth. FTD utilizes social justice (Cammarota, 2011) and critically conscious (Freire, 1971) principles through hip-hop-based education (HHBE; Petchauer, 2009) to address the SEL needs of urban youth. Our study is a phenomenological inquiry into youth participants' perspectives and experiences with the FTD program. This examination allows educators the opportunity to hear from marginalized urban youth about the important factors that contribute to their SEL.

Current approaches to meeting marginalized students' social and emotional needs

A framework that is currently documenting the connection between developing youth social and emotional competencies most frequently in the literature is the construct of SEL (Weissberg et al., 2003). SEL is considered a framework for helping children, and even adults, develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness through five areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In a comprehensive meta-analysis, Durlak and colleagues (2011) reviewed results from studies of students who participated in 213 school-based SEL programs and found that (a) students showed, on average, a gain of 11 percentage points in academic performance; (b) these programs promoted prosocial behavior and reduced internalizing problems and conduct concerns in students; and (c) academic testing results and grades significantly improved.

Following such promising results, SEL has gained tremendous momentum in educational settings, as numerous schools continue to adopt SEL programs and practices. For instance, in the wake of the Children's Mental Health Act of 2003, 405 Ill. Stat. Ann. § 49 (2003), many boards of education, such as the Illinois State Board of Education, incorporated SEL standards that focus on developing students' self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision-making goals into their broader state learning standards. The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization devoted to promoting SEL in schools, has been working with policy makers to gain support for a new legislative bill (i.e., Supporting Emotional Learning Act of 2014, H. R. 4509, 113th Cong., 2014) that would allocate funding for SEL research and ensure that future K–12 teachers are trained in SEL principles (CASEL, 2014). As advocates continue to push for SEL standards to be integrated into standard school practices, much is unknown regarding how school context and student population might affect the success of SEL interventions.

Integrating culture and context into youth social and emotional interventions

Although SEL research has been shown to improve both academic and psychosocial outcomes for youth, scholars have suggested that current SEL programming has a one-size-fits-all approach, thus failing to meet the needs of students on the margins (Castro-Olivo, 2010). Such a general approach might help explain mixed findings within the SEL outcome literature (Joseph & Strain, 2003), offering insight into why a given SEL program is effective for certain youth but not for others. Researchers (Castro-Olivo & Merrell, 2012) and professional organizations alike have suggested that interventions designed for youth should be culturally responsive to the unique needs of all children, especially for youth that have been marginalized or traditionally underrepresented in U.S. society. These youth, in

particular, are at greater risk for such social and emotional concerns as depression, anxiety, and physical and emotional trauma (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). Their life experience and contextual environment is qualitatively different from those of the majority of youth in this country (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000).

Castro, Barrera, and Martinez (2004) discussed the importance of adapting prevention interventions for cultural relevancy. These scholars suggest different types of cultural adaptations to interventions and provide rationale and procedures for how to specifically target the adaptation of the intervention. Other scholars have discussed the importance and relevance of cultural adaptation in intervention development and research as well (Lopez, Edwards, Teramoto-Perotti, & Ito, 2002). Lopez, Edwards, Teramoto-Pedrotti, and Ito (2002) discussed the importance of adapting intervention content for culturally appropriate programming, emphasizing the impact of culture on mental health. Further, the researchers went on to implore scholars to design culturally relevant prevention programming and provide rubrics and informative resources to assist in the development of future programming (Lopez et al., 2002). More specifically, Ginwright and Cammarrota (2002) pointed out that the relevance of culture, race, class, gender, and sexual identity in PYD and SEL are not yet fully understood, and they are seldom intentionally integrated into program design. Garbarino (1995) argued that the ever-present realities of violence and poverty in urban communities generate "social toxins … a term used to represent the degree to which the social world has become poisonous to a person's well-being" (p. 61). To socially detox from such negative outcomes, Duncan-Andrade (2009) argued that what is required is a critical hope that demands a committed and active struggle against the tides of social inequality and personal despair.

Social justice youth development

Further applying the critical role social and political realities have on youth development, Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) presented a framework called Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) that has the goal of building a more equitable society by engaging critically conscious citizens. SJYD is based upon five principles and strategies leading to a theory of social justice development in youth: (a) analyzing power within social relationships, (b) making identity central, (c) promoting systemic social change, (d) encouraging collective action, and (e) embracing youth culture.

SJYD researchers critique the current framework of psychological interventions, such as PYD and SEL, for overemphasis of youth assets over other contextual factors. This overemphasis can be especially detrimental for youth of color in urban contexts, given the importance of acknowledging the various social factors such as poverty, gun violence, disproportionate incarceration rates, and unemployment affecting their lives (Cammarota, 2011). Although the PYD and SEL framework makes great strides from the older problem-driven paradigm, it overcompensates by promoting supports and opportunities as the only components necessary for positive youth development. Further, the current formulations of PYD and SEL, which are based on White middle-class perceptions of youth, can homogenize their experiences, simplify their identities, and overly conceptualize them through a eurocentric cultural lens.

Although SEL has begun to address the importance of empowering youth and of using an asset-focused approach to engage them (Durlak et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2002), few studies examining SEL within at-risk youth populations address culturally sensitive content (Garner et al., 2014). Like PYD, SEL places more emphasis on the changing of the individual than on the institutional context they are situated in. Conversely, SJYD places a warranted emphasis on context and culture, but does not look at the role social and emotional competencies play in helping youth heal from brutal experiences experienced in the inner city. By blending SEL and SJYD together, the social and emotional needs of youth can be met in culturally relevant ways that promote healthy identity development and social change. Although many researchers have developed SEL interventions (Durlak et al., 2011) and critically conscious interventions (Diemer & Blustein, 2006), to date there has been only one intervention study in the peer-reviewed literature utilizing the SJYD paradigm (Iwasaki, Springett, Dashora, McLaughlin, & McHugh, 2014) and no

discussion or intervention studies involving the use of SEL in conjunction with SJYD. The Fulfill the Dream (FTD) program was strategically designed to utilize both these frameworks (SJYD and SEL) in order to address the unique needs of marginalized urban youth.

Fulfill the Dream (FTD) program

There is a significant gap in the SEL literature for describing effective interventions with high school students of color, students in poverty, and youth who have experienced marginalization of any kind (Garner et al., 2014; Weissberg & Kumpfer, 2003). This project, FTD, is an innovative approach for engaging marginalized youth through a hip-hop-based SEL curriculum that emphasizes the tenets of social justice and critical consciousness (see Table 1). This involves both understanding the role of youth culture in the enhancement of social and emotional well-being and engaging youth and their communities through activities that enhance critical and creative skills.

Focusing on cultivating leadership, relationship, and citizenship skills, each workshop of FTD's 10-chapter curriculum utilizes the history of hip-hop culture as a case study (see Table 1). In addition to learning how hip-hop grew to a global phenomenon, each chapter includes movement activities, visual metaphors, and original hip-hop music, and allows youth opportunities to discover their sparks while also setting goals to use that spark (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Through the utilization of a critically conscious approach oriented to social justice, youth begin a journey of redefining their goals and dreams, reconstructing their identities all while making personal, interpersonal, and community dreams a reality. The program curriculum builds cumulatively as it gives students tools to critically examine and deconstruct their realities for the purpose of discovering and cultivating assets to direct themselves and their communities toward positive change.

As part of their participation in the program, youth are required to have a culminating project at the end of the program that represents what they learned and how they will apply it. Participants are encouraged to take the resources they have identified and communicate the lessons they have learned, creatively, with their class and their community. This is often done through a poem, a rap, a song, or a collage. The second part of the culminating project includes a plan regarding how they can take what

Table 1. Lessons for Fulfill the Dream program.

Lesson	Principles/Competencies	Description
Reality Check (Lesson 1)	SJYD—Analyzing power within social relationships	Enhancing critical consciousness by exploring how big business benefits from youth buying into fantasy definitions of self and the society.
Inner GPS (Lesson 2)	SJYD—Making identity central SEL—Constructive sense of self	Understanding your roots and critically thinking about the fruits you want to leave for the next generation.
Soul Bling (Lesson 3)	SJYD—Making identity central SEL—Constructive sense of self	Discovering inner strengths and celebrating one's uniqueness.
Your Crew (Lesson 4)	SEL—Active listening, expressive communication, help seeking	Learning how to cultivate healthy relationships and develop a diverse support system.
Pimp My Ride (Lesson 5)	SEL—Awareness of feelings, management of feelings, personal responsibility	Dealing with grief and learning the power of forgiveness.
I Have a Dream Too! (Lesson 6)	SEL—Adaptive goal setting, problem solving	Developing an action plan that aligns with personal mission and vision.
Obstacles & Opportunities (Lesson 7)	SJYD—Promoting systemic social change SEL—Expressive communication, negotiation, refusal	Finding and using your voice to overcome compromising situations.
Life's Hurricanes (Lesson 8)	SEL—Awareness of feelings, management of feelings, help seeking	Learning steps to proactively make it through personal challenges.
The Good Life Now! (Lesson 9)	SJYD—Embracing youth culture SEL—Adaptive goal setting, problem solving	Setting both short-term and long-term goals to engage in value-driven behavior.
The Great Life Legacy (Lesson 10)	SJYD—Encouraging collective action SEL—Respect for others, social responsibility	Learning to solve social problems authentically and creatively.

Note. SJYD = Social Justice Youth Development; SEL = Social Emotional Learning.

Table 2. Themes, subthemes, and descriptions.

Themes	Subthemes	Description
Social and emotional learning outcomes	Self-awareness	Reflection about emotional experiences and strengths brought self-discovery.
	Critical consciousness	Greater understanding of community context, barriers, supports, etc.
	Self-determination and motivation	Motivated to make the right choices to meet their goals.
	Hope	Can see future or new plans for the future.
	Positive self-talk	Change in respect for self or greater self-confidence.
Effective components of the program	Authentic adult relationships	Students' connection with adults was meaningful, as students felt heard and understood by them. Adults encouraged students' self-empowerment, self-confidence, and goal-setting.
	Relevance to youth	Program material was relevant and palatable for students in their cultural context. They often talked about program leaders speaking to them on their level in their language, utilizing hip-hop based education.
	Relevance to environment	Aid them to critically think about situations they are in within their context (e.g., friends, drugs).
	Metacognition	Contextualize or critically think about choices (i.e., friendships).
	Focus on the future	Making decisions that build on what they learned, whether it meant deciding which friends will be beneficial for them or making choices to meet their goals (e.g., college, military, graduation).
Areas for improvement	Mentoring needs	Students recommended increased individual attention from mentors. They expressed a desire to job shadow mentors and meet outside of school to further develop the mentor/mentee relationship.
	Longer duration of the program	Meeting more often or for a longer duration (e.g., more than ten weeks).

they have learned and serve a person or group of people in need. Once this plan is developed, they are encouraged to follow through with it and, ultimately, to reflect on their service with one another.

The curriculum is currently taught as part of a weekly colloquium in which the facilitators utilize the lesson-plan guides from the curriculum. The program is facilitated by two local artists trained in the curriculum by the Good Life Alliance, the organization that authored the program. These facilitators are employed by a local community arts center that is situated in the same neighborhood as the school. Each session with the students runs 75 min, and is filled with discussion, creative writing assignments, small-group activities, and the critical analysis of music and media from the culture of the youth. Educators also lead certain sections of the curriculum by utilizing the lesson plans provided and help follow up with students on topics after the facilitators leave.

Method

A phenomenological approach was utilized to accurately capture the experiences of youth who completed the FTD program (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Unfortunately, there has been little research examining the perspective of marginalized urban youth and their experience with SEL curriculums in high school. Thus, an exploratory qualitative approach was employed to begin illuminating the experience of these youth. A phenomenological approach allows the researchers to clarify the participants' subjective experience and describe their experience exactly as it appears in their consciousness (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenology allows for a constructivist theoretical lens that provides the participant the opportunity to express their experience and for the researcher to illuminate the meaning of their experience, rather than the participant being the object of an investigation (Moustakas,

1994). This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the supporting university of the first author.

Participants

Participants for this study included nine African American adolescents, ages 17–19 years, all of whom were living in poverty (i.e., on free and reduced-price lunch) and attending an urban alternative school in a large inner city in the regional Midwest. Of these participants, three were boys (33%) and six girls (67%), with five identifying academically as juniors in high school and four identifying as seniors. To be eligible for the study, participants met the following study criteria. They (a) were currently enrolled as a student, (b) completed the FTD program during the 2012–2013 school year at the selected alternative school, and (c) consented voluntarily to be interviewed regarding their experience in the FTD program.

Setting

The setting for this study is an alternative high school situated in a large urban school district in the Midwest. The racial and ethnic background of the students in this school is 100% underrepresented minorities, with 98% African American and 2% Latino or Latina. All students currently enrolled in the school are experiencing impoverished conditions, as evidenced by their qualification for receiving free and reduced-price lunch in 2013. Approximately 90% of the students transferred from neighborhood schools because they had difficulty with traditional education. The remaining students were either referred by family members who once attended the alternative high school or were recommended to attend by community organizations. The mission of the school is to create life-long learners who demonstrate the tenacity of the human spirit with staff members focused on supporting youth as they move from crisis to empowerment and positive change. The school is known for its smaller classrooms, one-on-one attention, and the use of a holistic pedagogy.

Analytic procedures

After completing the FTD program and receiving completed informed-consent forms, participants were given the opportunity to take part in this study. Youth who chose to participate met with either the first author or one of two graduate students individually for a 45–60 min, semistructured interview (see Appendix for interview protocol). The research team consisted of an assistant professor in educational studies and three graduate students. All research team members had previous experience utilizing multiple qualitative methods, with previous training in phenomenology specifically. Members of the research team met together to construct a semistructured interview protocol focusing on broad open-ended questions allowing participants to speak to their experience with the FTD program without the interviewers guiding them in any particular direction. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the graduate students with the transcriptions being checked for accuracy against the actual tapes. After the interviews and transcriptions were completed, the analytic process for phenomenological inquiry outlined by Moustakas (1994) was utilized.

The first step in this process is that of *epoche*. Epoche is defined as the process in which researchers engage to remove, or at least become aware of, prejudices, biases, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). Team members reported assuming that students' experience with the SEL curriculum would be generally positive and that they would be able to identify specifics about program components as they discussed their experience. Team members attempted to set aside their personal viewpoints to see the experience for itself prior to conducting interviews (Patton, 1990).

The second step in the analysis process is phenomenological reduction. We bracketed the transcribed interviews to take the information out of the world in which it occurred to dissect and seriously inspect the information. As a collective unit, the team located key phrases and statements that spoke to

the phenomenon in question, interpreting and inspecting the meaning of these phrases, and offered a tentative definition of these meaning units. After the data was grouped into meaningful clusters, irrelevant or repetitive data was removed. Finally, the analytic process resulted in developing a synthesis amongst meaning units or themes. This process allowed the research team to find deeper meanings among each meaning unit or theme and develop more specific subthemes. When discrepancies arose among team members and raters during the analytic process, discussion ensued until consensus was reached amongst the entire team (Wertz, 2005).

Results

The results of the phenomenological inquiry indicated three theme clusters with subordinate themes that describe the experiences and meaning these youth built during their participation in the FTD program (see Table 2). The clusters detail the internal growth that they experienced within the program (i.e., SEL outcomes), the components of the program that affected their growth (i.e., effective components of the program), and finally the areas that could change or improve the student's experience (i.e., areas of growth).

SEL outcomes

The first cluster details the internal growth or change in the students' intrapersonal experience of self and their environment. Students reported a change in their (a) self-awareness, (b) hope, (c) positive self-talk, and (d) critical consciousness (a growth).

Self-awareness. Facilitated by the program, students wrote, sang, and voiced their emotions and life experiences. Through poetry, hip-hop, and other forms of artistic expression, the students reported a change in how they understood their emotions as they learned new ways of coping. A 19-year-old female senior participant described gaining greater insight into her affective experience through writing and sharing her experience with others, stating, "You feel good, better about yourself, 'cause you let it all out of your head now. It's just on the sheet of paper" (Participant 2, August 2012). Through such processes of expression, the students reported gaining greater insight into personal strengths and making new meaning out of their life narratives. This concept of self-awareness or identifying self through a critically conscious lens is similar to a major component of SJYD (Cammarota, 2011). For example, an 18-year-old female senior participant said:

> I learned that I am a very strong person to not let things get in my way. Like, let stuff bother me 'cause I'm the type of person; I'm very sensitive. So, whatever they say, I take it to the head. I just don't say nothing, and sometimes I just write about it too. (Participant 7, August 2012)

Critical consciousness. Students identified growth in their awareness of the impact of others and the impact of their environment on their future goals and their beliefs about themselves. Specifically, several students acknowledged the detrimental effect of exposure to violence and death on their worldview. These concepts are directly related to the core principles of SJYD, specifically: awareness of self, community, and others from a critical perspective (Cammarota, 2011). After several hours of witnessing a violent crime from beginning to end, one participant described having only 1 hr of sleep before attending school the next day. She elaborated through a poem she wrote previously and read aloud:

> There he was lying on my back way, covered in bullet holes and blood. As I looked, tears came down my eyes. Looking at people surrounding him until the police came. Body bag, body bag. Not five minutes, not ten minutes, but twenty minutes, it took them to come. As he lay on the floor breathing, they took thirty years to come, just to put him in the ambulance. Wait, they didn't. One forty-five still laying there. Feeling sick and I can't take what I saw, out the window. … Black body bag, black body bag. There he goes in the black body bag. Five thirty-eight, I realize I had a hour to sleep, to get ready for school as I think, "Why me?" As I think to myself, I already got a lot of stuff on my mind, only nineteen and seeing a lot of stuff that I don't need to see. (Participant 2, August 2012)

As illustrated in this poem, students spoke to the ways in which institutional bias such as law enforcement and health care can affect them and those in their community.

Self-determination and motivation. Fueled by the assignments from the program, students described having increased determination and motivation to attain their goals. In addition to the program curriculum, many students attributed this motivational increase to the push they experienced from the group leaders and peers. For example, one student shared feeling validated and having an increased motivation to pursue his dream of becoming a police detective after being encouraged by a group leader to do so. An 18-year-old female junior participant described how the program helped her realize her ability to achieve her academic and financial goals, stating, "Yeah, I see me graduating now, doing everything I want to do. I got a job now. So, that's good. I could work up, saving up getting my own house, stuff like that" (Participant 5, August 2012).

Hope. In conjunction with increased motivation, students also felt a new sense of hope about their ability to actualize their goals. This increased confidence was also linked to students spending more time thinking about their future in a meaningful way. Students said that the program challenged them to explore their goals and build a plan to attain them. Moreover, students reported interacting with people who challenged and believed in them bolstered their hope. One participant said that the program "gave me a positive thought on my future" (Participant 7, August 2012).

Positive self-talk. Students described how the program helped change the way they speak to themselves internally. Students said they had difficulty believing in their ability to complete school for a number of reasons (e.g., unsupported by family, pulled by work responsibilities or their own children) prior to the program. One participant, a 19-year-old male senior, mentioned becoming more self-aware by being part of the FTD program, having learned to think positively about himself:

> Really, just thinking nothing bad of yourself, you just. If you don't think nothing bad of yourself, you basically in your own world if you don't think nothing bad of yourself. Keeping everything calm, good, and you just focused on everything. (Participant 1, August 2012)

Effective components of program

The second cluster emerged out of repeated mention of components in the program that the students experienced as positive. The subthemes included (a) authentic adult relationships, (b) relevant to youth, (c) relevant to environment, (d) metacognitive understanding, and (e) focus on the future.

Authentic adult relationships. The theme of authentic adult relationships is a collection of experiences reported by students who felt their connection to the leaders affected their success in the program. All of the participants identified their relationship to the group leaders as central to their experience in the program. Students reported a one-to-one connection with the adult leaders, which enabled them to open up and explore their life. Speaking about this connection, a 19-year-old female junior stated:

> If I need somebody to talk to, they are always there. They ain't gonna never turn around and deny me for having a conversation. But, sometimes they like walk up to me like, "Wanna talk?" It just the little things that count. Giving us the space to open up, they let me open up to them. I learned a few things. It opened, I saw better things in life. I saw more opportunities. They showed me more people and like, they was like comfortable. I was comfortable being around them. I was comfortable telling them my personal life stories and we open up to each other. (Participant 9, August 2012)

Relevance to youth. Students reported that the program material was relevant and palatable for them in their cultural context. Specifically, facilitators' knowledge about urban youth culture and hip-hop culture was salient. Participant 1 (August 2012) mentioned,

Like one time we did a program through a song. We going through the lyrics trying to see what did it actually mean and you got some kids that don't listen actually like to the lyrics….basically, you see it thinking in my head like, this stuff actually like really happened in our world, all the killing. It just needs to stop.

An essential component highlighted by the students was the self-involvement the facilitators used to explain the material and share in the experience with the students. Describing one such encounter, an 18-year-old female junior shared,

We have fun. They was talking to us about love and stuff. They used to rap to us and stuff. … She [the facilitator] was telling us about how her brother, her family used to do her wrong and stuff … that really hit me. Like, it was really unfair for me 'cause I'm young. I'm real young. And then, like the stuff that she was saying, I could relate to that. (Participant 5, August 2012)

Relevance to environment. In addition to the program material being relevant to youth culture, students also indicated that the material was relevant to their cultural environment. Program topics explored aspects of society, community, friends, and family to raise awareness about the potential impact each domain could have on an individual. For example, an 18-year-old female senior described how the program gave her a new perspective:

I used to ditch school and go and hang out, party with my friends and stuff. And school was never one of my priorities, but once you start going up and you realize you can't get nowhere without that education. … But like [the facilitator] said, you can't always follow after what everybody does 'cause in the end, you only hurting yourself. So, I changed the friends I was with. (Participant 6, August 2012)

Metacognition. Students spoke to the program's ability to teach them to challenge their own way of thinking in an effort to think independently and with more complexity. Students noted a shift in the way that they contextualized and critically thought about their environment, their goals and the choices that they make, and their emotional needs and how to satisfy them. For example, Participant 2 (August 2012) explained,

Now what I do when I need somebody to talk to, I still write down on a sheet of paper to clear my mind. But also, I still got people that I'm real close to and talk to them. And the people I got close to, they knows I can trust them and not going to tell my business. So, thinking and talking help a lot.

Focus on the future. Another theme that arose from the students' experience was the importance of focusing on future goals. The mentors challenged, believed in, and supported the exploration of the students' aspirations. An 18-year-old female junior explained how the program's focus on the future affected her, stating,

Before they [the program] came, I was just like forget school. School was nothing. I don't need no diploma, nothing. I could just find something else to do, something like that, find another way to get some money or something. But then, now, it's like it ain't all about that. If I get my education, if I get my diploma, I can go farther. (Participant 3, August 2012)

Areas for improvement. In addition to sharing their experiences within the program, some of the students offered ways the program could be expanded and improved. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged: (a) mentoring needs and (b) longer duration of the program.

Mentoring needs. As previously indicated, students reported benefiting from the personal interactions they had with the program facilitators and suggested that the program incorporate more individualized attention to the students. Many participants explained that they would like to meet their mentors outside of the school setting so that they might better understand their mentors' day-to-day life in a career. Students desired a mentoring relationship in which they could see how life is lived in the ways that their mentors are asking them to live their own lives. An 18-year-old male junior discussed the strong desire to have facilitators spend time with him in the real world:

> Instead of make it like, let them go hang with they homies, you be they homies. Like, you be out with them. If they be out with you, I be like going outside with you see how it live to live your life, like, how we getting prepared for the real world. (Participant 8, August 2012)

Longer duration of the program. Additionally, some students wanted the program to last longer (i.e., longer than 10 weeks), encompassing more activities and lessons. While describing his experience in the program, Participant 1 (August 2012) stated, "I really wanted to see them [the facilitators/program] come more to be honest with you." These students expressed a belief that students would continue to benefit from the program if it continued to be offered beyond its current timeframe.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experience of educationally marginalized urban youth with the FTD social and emotional learning program based on the theory of SJYD (Cammarota, 2011). The researchers utilized a phenomenological approach to inquire about participant experiences and to illuminate the voice of each youth participant. The results suggest that youth participants articulated components of the program that were beneficial to their personal and academic development, providing implications for future development of SEL interventions in urban communities with marginalized youth. Specifically, youth emphasized the importance of establishing authentic relationships with the facilitators, developing critical consciousness, and engaging with youth with issues and concepts that are relevant to their culture. This dynamic adds to the SEL literature by answering the call of recent scholars (Castro-Olivo & Merrell, 2012; Garner et al., 2014) to engage marginalized youth within their own cultural context and in a way that honors their unique experience.

Implications

The participants' narratives offer several implications for the SEL community at large as well as educators working with youth who have been marginalized in urban educational settings.

Developing authentic and accepting relationships with youth. Youth participants expressed the importance of having an opportunity to express themselves in relationships with adults that they perceive to be safe, allowing them to feel heard, accepted, and understood. This provides the opportunity to process and become more self-aware, an essential component of SEL and SJYD (Cammarota, 2011; CASEL, 2013). Several youth indicated that the facilitators would share some of their personal stories with the youth that related to the theme of the curriculum. In addition, students were allowed to share their own stories in ways that were relevant to them. This is evidenced in the numerous times students described how they wrote a poem, wrote a rap, or brought in a song that related to their experience and how this was celebrated by facilitators in the class. The ability to bring in the culture and experiences taking place in the community and make it part of the classroom experience is not only in line with SJYD components (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002), but also provides opportunity for authentic relationship building, an important SEL competency. Finally, the opportunities to share stories and engage in critical dialogue, or what Freire (1971) calls dialogics, allow youth to cocreate new knowledge about relevant and personal issues and explore ways of solving them.

In addition to the importance of a strong relationship with facilitators, participants indicated that they wanted these relationships to extend even further. Some youth expressed a desire to spend time with the facilitators outside of school, suggesting that the program include mentors or big brothers for participants. This finding corroborates the mentorship literature that suggests that for youth labeled *at risk*, or who have been marginalized, having a mentor can decrease the likelihood of discipline referrals and school dropout (Blechman, 1992; Royse, 1998). More recently, Tolan, Hentry, Schoeny, Lovegrove, and Nichols (2014) conducted a meta-analytic review of mentoring programs for youth labeled at risk, concluding that mentoring significantly reduces delinquency and aggression, and promotes academic functioning in mentored youth. However, they suggested that still more

research is needed on specific mentoring program components that are effective (Tolan et al., 2014). Our research study would suggest that connecting with adult mentors through mentor–mentee similarities and through youth cultural norms enhances the bond between adult and youth.

Identification with hip-hop culture and urban communities. Youth participants expressed that a strength of the FTD program was the ability of facilitators to communicate with youth through material that they respect and enjoy, particularly hip-hop. HHBE is the utilization of hip-hop, often rap songs and lyrics, as a pedagogical resource (Petachauer, 2009). Previous research on HHBE supports the results of this study, suggesting that HHBE helps youth improve their academic motivation, foster critical consciousness, and become more self-aware (Dimitriadis, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Irby & Hall, 2011; Stovall, 2006). Utilizing the medium of hip-hop assists in addressing the SJYD tenets of self-awareness and, more poignantly, the awareness of others and community. However, rarely have researchers discussed the relevancy that HHBE has for youth identity development and addressing social and emotional needs (Petchauer, 2009). The FTD program demonstrates one possible way to address youth social and emotional needs through the utilization of HHBE.

In addition to the utilization of hip-hop to engage FTD participants, youth noted that when adults were able to understand the participants' context (e.g., neighborhood, family, culture) they felt empowered and were more willing to engage in self-exploration with a trusted adult. Such interpersonal connections frequently happened when adult facilitators were willing to share something of themselves with the youth they were working with and were willing to listen and acknowledge each youth's story. These findings are consistent with the educational literature suggesting that youth are more likely to feel a sense of connection in school if they feel heard, understood, and accepted (Goodenow, 1993).

Emphasizing social justice and critical consciousness. As a result of being able to establish rapport with the youth participants through acceptance, contextual awareness, and the utilization of hip hop as a medium, facilitators were able to provide social-justice education throughout the program. This allowed for an increase in students' critical consciousness, as evidenced by their discussion of what they learned about themselves through the program: self-awareness, determination/motivation, hope, future goals, and metacognitive processes. In educating youth in social-justice principles and critical consciousness, researchers have consistently demonstrated that youth are more able to reject societal stereotypes and embrace school achievement (Diemer & Bustein, 2009; O'Connor, 1997). Further, many scholars consider the concept of social-justice education to be essential for youth who find themselves on the margins of school communities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). When youth have had the opportunity to think critically and develop their own critical consciousness, they have a higher probability of succeeding academically (Cammarota, 2011). The results from this study help to confirm that educating youth about the sociopolitical context in which they reside can affirm youth identity development and engagement in future goals. Further, the findings of youth participant experiences with FTD highlight the principles of social-justice youth development and demonstrate the integration of this theory in an SEL intervention for the first time.

Limitations

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to understanding the youth experience with the FTD program. Although this approach provided rich information and results from individual participant perspectives, it has limitations worth noting. The small sample size, the utilization of only one urban alternative school, participant self-selection, and the homogeneity of the participants limit the generalizability of the findings. Further, future research involving a quasi-experimental design to examine quantitative outcomes would be beneficial in understanding the impact of programs like FTD.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenological experience of marginalized urban youth in the FTD SEL program. The results indicate that the youth participants enjoyed many aspects of the program and articulated the ways in which they grew by being part of the program. The results confirm findings from previous scholars regarding the importance of integrating culture (Castro-Olivo & Merrill, 2012), critical consciousness and SJYD (Cammorota, 2011; Freire, 1971), authentic relationships (Tolan et al., 2013), and HHBE (Petchauer, 2009) in designing SEL interventions working with urban youth. The uniqueness of this study is utilizing all of these concepts collectively in SEL programming and the findings that suggest youth appreciated and grew from utilizing the approach. This study highlights the value and importance of these concepts and taking care in providing SEL interventions that acknowledge the uniqueness of the youth being served while utilizing a critical SJYD approach (Cammorota, 2011; Castro-Olivo, 2010).

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Appendix. Interview protocol

1. Can you describe yourself?
   - Please describe your living situation.
   - Please describe your friends/peers.
   - What do you think are your strengths/weaknesses?
2. How do you view the role of education in your life?
   - Please describe your school.
3. What are your goals/future aspirations?
   - What hardships or obstacles have you had to confront in the pursuit of your goals?
   - Who/What has supported you in your pursuit of your goals?

4. What does your race/ethnicity mean to you?
5. How have you experienced the Fulfill the Dream program?
   - What are the strengths/advantages of the program?
   - What are the weaknesses/disadvantages of the program?
6. Can you describe how you feel you have been treated by school personnel since Fulfill the Dream started?
7. Describe how you felt before Fulfill the Dream in comparison with your present situation.
   - In what ways have you changed since starting Fulfill the Dream?
8. What aspects of Fulfill the Dream have made an impact or influenced the way in which you understand yourself?
   - What about the way in which you understand other people?
   - What about the way in which you view the future?