“Where I Can Be Myself”: Black Youth Narratives of Their Future Careers

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Abstract
This qualitative study centers on the career narratives of seven Black youth enrolled at an urban public school in the Midwest. We used critical race theory to analyze participants’ responses to a narrative career counseling intervention, My Career Story (Savickas & Hartung, 2012). The four interconnected themes found were (a) persistence against all odds, (b) unconditional acceptance and connections, (c) self-advocacy, and (d) tranquility. We discuss direct implications for school/career counselors and school counselor educators.

Keywords
Black youth, My Career Story, critical race theory

Career development in K–12 settings has mostly resided within the responsibility and role of the school counselor. Comprehensive school counseling programs substantially infuse career development programming as highlighted in the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College-, Career- and Life-Readiness Standards for Every Student (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2021). These research-based standards, supported and developed by ASCA, are used by school counselors to facilitate the development of academic, post-secondary, and social/emotional development for all students (ASCA, 2021). Delivery systems within the ASCA National Model ensure that school counselors deliver supported college and career readiness (ASCA, 2019; Brown & Brown, 2012). Within comprehensive school counseling programs, career development can be delivered using a variety of approaches (i.e., classroom, small group, and individual) to help students develop short- and long-term planning related to their educational and career paths (ASCA, 2019, 2021; Brown & Brown, 2012).

The National Career Development Association, a part of the Coalition for Career Development (CCD), participated in the development of a white paper that prioritized career readiness for all U.S. students (CCD, 2019). CCD poignantly identified the lack of resources available to provide quality career interventions and development in schools (2019). The quality of the execution of career development programs in schools affects all students but particularly students of color who already experience marginalization related to socioeconomic status (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016), discrimination/racism (Brown & Segrist, 2015), and sexism (Conkel-Ziebell, et al., 2019). School counselors must demonstrate culturally responsive practices (Hartung, 2002), yet the profession lacks relevant techniques or counselor knowledge for school counselors to rely on when working with Black youth and other students of color. This renders Black youth’s preparation for postsecondary vocational options incomplete (Byrd, 2021). The use of a student’s story, or their narrative, can be helpful in acknowledging a student’s experience so that they feel heard (Storlie et al., 2017), which is often not the case in systems that perpetuate systemic racism. It is essential that school counselors recognize and respond to individual/systemic barriers when trying to employ culturally responsive career counseling (Mayes & Hines, 2014). However, the complex and multifarious issues and challenges impacting Black students must first be unpacked (Byrd, 2021). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to expand the limited scholarship focused on the career development of Black youth. The overarching research question is: How do Black youth connect narratives from their favorite stories with their values, interests, and future careers?

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Circumstances Influencing the Experiences of Black Youth in School Settings

Challenges affecting Black students have been highlighted through research exploring issues related to poverty, academic achievement/high school graduation rates, school discipline policies, and implicit bias of school staff (Castro, 2020; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; Hussar et al., 2020). Black students represent approximately 15.2% of the U.S. student population (Hussar et al., 2020), and we emphasize that our discussion of the challenges they face is not an effort to present them from a deficit perspective. Rather, our goal in highlighting these challenges is to shed light on the numerous systemic conditions that disproportionately influence the daily K–12 experiences of Black students that interrupt their career development. Notably, poverty, opportunity gaps, school discipline, and the implicit bias of school staff are distinct challenges that affect today’s Black youth (e.g., Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Epstein et al., 2017; Hussar et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2018).

Poverty continues to be a significant challenge facing Black students, with approximately 65% of Black students between the ages of 12 and 17 living with families from low-income backgrounds (Jiang et al., 2016). This percentage suggests that Black youth are at a much higher risk of growing up in poverty, which negatively impacts multiple aspects of their lives and the communities in which they live, the K–12 schools they attend, career paths they are exposed to, and their postsecondary pathways. For example, Black youth living in low-income communities are more likely to attend schools that receive much less funding when compared to schools that have a larger percentage of students who are White and/or from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). Black youth from impoverished backgrounds are also more likely to experience mental health challenges and are less likely to have needed access to mental health resources (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). Further, Holland and DeLuca (2016) shared that students from low-income backgrounds often have a more difficult transition into postsecondary education due to limited finances and graduating from high schools with inadequate resources.

Inequities in academic achievement often caused by opportunity gaps for Black youth have not only been documented for the past 50 years but transcend early childhood education to postsecondary education. Black youth are less likely to attend a high-quality early childhood education program (Ewen & Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016; Nores & Barnett, 2014), negatively affecting their ability to enter kindergarten with the skills and knowledge to reflect success as defined by these educational spaces. This is increasingly problematic considering Black youth represent the highest percentage (31%) of children under 18 living in poverty (Garcia, 2020; Hussar et al., 2020), and children living in poverty are less likely to have access to a high-quality early childhood or advanced education programs (Bassok & Galdo, 2015; Goings & Ford, 2018). For example, children in poverty are less likely to have access to gifted education programs and advanced placement courses (Ford et al., 2019; Hussar et al., 2020). These inequities also affect Black elementary and middle school-aged students as reflected in their performance on reading and math assessments (Hussar et al., 2020). One must consider that performance disparities on standardized tests are largely unfair because they have been found to be culturally biased and normed for middle-class White students (Garner et al., 2017; Helms, 1992). Therefore, attempts to measure Black students’ academic development are inherently flawed. K–12 curriculum in U.S. schools has been known to inadequately attend to or reflect the unique lived experiences of Black students (Garner et al., 2017). One way to increase the cultural presence of Black students in K–12 settings and curriculum is to increase representation (i.e., students seeing reflections of themselves in the curriculum or among school staff). Black students are often in learning environments composed mostly of people who are culturally dissimilar, which can be psychologically damaging.

Extensive research (e.g., OCR, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2012) has illustrated the disproportionate discipline practices along racial identities among students in public schools. Bryant and colleagues (2013) highlighted that “males of color have the highest rates of suspension and expulsion from school. They face more punitive punishments for school infractions and are far more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system” (p. 6). During the 2013–14 school year, 13.7% of Black students received one or more out-of-school suspensions, a rate much higher than their peers (i.e., 3.4 % of White students, 4.5 % of Hispanic or Pacific Islanders, and 6.7 % of American Indian/Alaska Natives). Skiba et al. (2011) examined racial and ethnic disparities in office referrals and administrative discipline decisions in a national sample of elementary and middle school-age students. Results indicated that Black middle school students were four times as likely to receive an office discipline referral. More recently, OCR (2018) reported that although Black students account for just 15% of the student population, they accounted for 31% of the students who were referred to law enforcement or school-related arrests. In contrast, White students comprise 49% of the student population and represented 36% of the students referred to law enforcement or school-related arrests (OCR, 2018). When exploring discipline rate disparities, Black boys receive more than two out of three suspensions, yet Black girls are suspended at higher rates than girls of any other race and most boys (Agyapong, 2018; Ford et al., 2018; OCR, 2018). Many factors contribute to the surveilling of Black youth in K–12 settings, including adultification, school staff viewing them as less innocent, and more adult-like compared to their peers (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Epstein et al., 2017).

Despite the statistics previously discussed and the conditions that continue to paint the experiences of Black youth as plagued with deficits, the approaches being used to measure their success are normed by dominant-centered tools and definitions (Love, 2019). Black youth possess unique cultural strengths, both
individual and collective, that have historically contributed to their growth, resilience, and success despite barriers (Byrd, 2021; Henfield et al., 2014; Williams & Portman, 2014). Notably, scholars highlight the strengths that exist within Black communities and how school staff can better support their youth by creating efforts alongside community members (Love, 2019; Yosso, 2014). Beyond connecting with community members, however, schools and related personnel still need to actively work to dismantle internal and external barriers created by systemic racism (Byrd, 2021).

Critical personnel, such as school counseling professionals, is a group largely composed of White women (Mitcham-Smith, 2007). Bridgeland and Bruce (2011) report that of all school counselors surveyed in their study, 75% racially identified as White and 8% as Black. Although representation can positively influence the relationships between students of color and school personnel (Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2018), the implicit bias and actions of school staff influence their work supporting a student’s academic, career, and social/emotional development. Implicit bias refers to the conscious or unconscious stereotypical judgments individuals make about others that can influence our actions, decisions, and broadly how we understand others (Staats et al., 2017). In 2014, Goff et al. explored White women’s perception of Black children and found that the participants perceived Black boys as older and less innocent than their White same-age peers. Further, Bryan (2017) asserted that White teachers disproportionately target Black boys for minor disciplinary infractions. It is essential to not infer or generalize these findings to all White school counselors. However, as a profession, we need to be astutely aware that White school counselors, who are mostly women, have been socialized similarly to those represented in the previously mentioned studies (Bryan, 2017; Goff et al., 2014). Bryan (2017) described experiences with White women in preservice teacher educator programs; the participants in the study conducted by Goff and colleagues were predominantly White women seeking college degrees. Thus, given the consistencies in demographics when compared to the school counseling profession, school counselors may well have had similar socialization experiences. The noted mistreatment and mischaracterizations of Black youth, or implicit bias, heavily influences how school counselors counsel or do not serve Black students, including informing them of career pathways.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework, or lens, developed from critical legal studies in the 1970s. Born out of radical feminism, the civil rights movement, law, ethnic studies, history, sociology, and women’s studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Pulliam, 2017; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), CRT demands justice, disrupts systems of structural racial inequality, and facilitates the emancipation of underrepresented ethnic groups from the inherent oppressive practices that plague the U.S. justice system (Crenshaw et al., 1995; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). CRT critiques the relationship between race, racism, power, and privilege to challenge patterns of racist and patriarchal dominance over people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Notably, CRT “goes beyond the experience of whites as the normative standard and instead grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive historical context that places an emphasis on the experiences of people of color” (Lynn et al., 2013, p. 607).

CRT has been embraced within the field of education since the late 1990s, when K–12 researchers, staff, and faculty were looking for approaches to combat the permeating presence of racism in education (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Love, 2019). CRT as a framework challenges traditional approaches that minimize and sequester race, gender, and class by highlighting how the intersection of these constructs impact people of color (Solórzano et al., 2000). Further, CRT denounces basic premises such as race neutrality, meritocracy, objectivity, and colorblindness (Sleeter, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), common practices found in K–12 settings (Love, 2019). The number of CRT tenets documented varies in research and scholarship (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Six tenets of CRT often described are (a) counter-storytelling, (b) permanence of racism, (c) whiteness as property, (d) interest convergence, (e) critique of liberalism, and (f) intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The first tenet, counter-storytelling, centers the voices of those who have historically been marginalized to provide a space where they can center their own realities, describe experiences with oppression, question dominant narratives, and be in community with others like them (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The second tenet, permanence of racism, acknowledges that racism is a common occurrence that is embedded in all facets of society (Hiraldo, 2010). The next tenet, whiteness as property, sheds light on the unearned social, political, and economic advantages that historically come with being White (Harris, 1993). The fourth tenet, interest convergence, describes how efforts intended to liberate people of color only advance if they align with the desires of those in power. The fifth tenet, critique of liberalism, highlights the danger of colorblindness and assertions of neutrality. This tenet argues that such approaches camouflage privilege and support the maintenance of the current power structure. The final tenet, intersectionality, is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw that illuminates the unique oppression faced by individuals and the interconnectedness of the identities people hold (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

We used CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) as the theoretical framework for this study, given the importance of race and social identity in the development of adolescent Black youth. CRT allowed us to acknowledge that systemic racial prejudices exist within social, political, economic, and educational structures. It also provided us the opportunity to advocate for historically and presently oppressed Black youth to highlight their experiences and reject White achievement as the benchmark for success (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Finally, CRT supported the process of counter-storytelling, which connects with
both the intervention approach, My Career Story (MCS), and the methodology of narrative inquiry.

**Narrative Career Exploration among Black Students**

Career development is interconnected with developmental processes and other dimensional identities such as gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, spirituality, and sexual orientation (Albritton et al., 2020; Leong & Leong, 2014). Therefore, we chose a career counseling approach informed by narrative career theory to employ cultural sensitivity while learning more about how Black youth can express, in their own words, the stories of their future careers too often told from Eurocentric lens and perspectives. Research exploring the use of narrative career theory with Black youth is limited (Albritton et al., 2020; Storlie et al., 2017). When broadly examining ways to employ culturally responsive career counseling, the scholarly literature appears to primarily focus on examining and understanding potential differences based on gender and race/ethnicity (e.g., Porter & Byrd, 2021; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2011). Although these studies offer insight into the career development of Black students, research suggests that a more in-depth examination by narratives and storytelling may be needed due to the complex oppression faced by Black youth (Albritton et al., 2020). Career counseling approaches informed by narrative theory provide individuals an opportunity to conceptualize their vocational behavior in their own words instead of being forced to ascribe to fixed characteristics (Savickas, 2005).

Narrative career theory evolved from a group of career counselors and psychologists who created holistic approaches (i.e., assessments and interventions) “to help individuals articulate the story of themselves and their career journey in story-form rather than traditional objective career assessment scores” (Del Corso & Refuhs, 2011, p. 334). Narrative approaches have been useful in the exploration of career development of historically marginalized youth (Albritton et al., 2020; Storlie et al., 2017). The use of My Career Story (Savickas & Hartung, 2012), informed by narrative career theory, enhances the meaning-making process through an active recollection of the individual’s story (Refuhs, 2009; Savickas, 2001; 2011). Notably, storytelling has historically been used across the African diaspora to preserve history, to teach morals, and to learn more about oneself and the world (Byrd et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2019).

**My Career Story**

My Career Story (MCS) was developed out of the paradigm of career construction as a self-guided workbook with the purpose of producing a career life story (Savickas & Hartung, 2012). MCS provides reflection on various elements in one’s life to explore goals in career narratability, adaptability, intentionality, and action (Hartung & Santilli, 2018). MCS empowers individuals to self-author their career life story and pathway, providing a series of questions for individuals to reflect upon to relate to one’s current career problem. MCS has three distinct and separate parts: (a) Telling my story, (b) Hearing my story, and (c) Enacting my story. Latent semantic analysis demonstrated a mean agreement of 0.81 between MCS life portraits and career construction counseling experts (Hartung & Santilli, 2018), providing support for initial validity of the postmodern career instrument. The section of MCS used for this study was the narrative responses to telling my story. Specifically, students were to reflect and complete written responses to the following questions: (a) “Describe your favorite inspirational book or movie. Imagine you are explaining the storyline to someone unfamiliar with the movie/book”; (b) “List the key action words in the story. Indicate if similar words are used or if any of the action words are repeated in how you told the story”; (c) “How does the main character solve the main conflict/challenge/problem in the story?”; (d) “What inspires you the most about how the main character solved the problem?”; and (e) “Think about the settings of this inspiration book or movie. These are the kinds of places in which you may like to work, the people with whom you want to be, the problems you may have to address, and the procedures you like to use. Based on your descriptions above, tell in 2–4 sentences where you like to be located.” MCS and narrative inquiry provides a space for Black youth to share counter-stories and discourse that decentralsizes privileged, White, narratives; redefines what is “normal”, and affirms their unique stories (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004, p. 29; Love, 2019).

**Methods**

Narrative inquiry, a postmodern research approach, was the chosen methodology because it provides a construct that allows the researchers to attend to the voices of the participants in a sensitive and thoughtful manner (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2008). This methodological approach also aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of the career theory used to develop the activity employed to collect the data. Narrative inquiry acknowledges the sociocultural context of human experiences (Riessman, 2008), and encourages researchers to attend to the language of participants and their descriptions of power dynamics and change (Clandinin et al., 2016) and present spaces where the experiences of Black youth can be “made real” (Crenshaw, 2016). Narrative inquiry also aligned well with the data as students’ career stories expressed their internal and external worlds concerning places and time (Clandinin et al., 2016). We next describe the role of the researchers, the method, and trustworthiness.

**Positionality of Researchers**

Our research team comprised four cisgender women who are faculty members in counselor education and supervision and school psychology programs; two identify racially as Black American, one as Mexican American, and one as White/Euro-American. Through personal, professional, and academic
experiences, all four researchers share an understanding that Black youth continue to face marginalization in academic settings and are often relegated to disparaging statistics viewed as individual deficits and not the direct symptoms of systemic racism. In research, we feel the experiences of Black people should be viewed through many levels of consciousness that embody “more democratic concepts of knowledge and leadership that highlight human fallibility and mutual accountability, notions of individuality and contested authority that stress dynamic traditions and ideals of self-realization within participatory communities” (Gates & West, 1997, p. 64). Across all levels of the research process, we examined our biases that inform assumptions about the participants, including that students at this age: (a) may only refer to stories they learned about on social media, (b) would select stories with protagonists that look like them, and (c) would indirectly describe experiences with oppression but not directly because developmentally they may be unaware of representative language.

**Participants and Data Collection**

Seven Black seventh-graders in one school located in an urban, Midwestern city school were included in our sample. The participants were four girls and three boys, aged 12–17. Participants, as outlined in Table 1, indicated their age range and grade but did not report their specific ages. At the time of data collection, the school district had a high school graduation rate of 60.5%, child poverty in the 98th percentile, and a Latinx/a/o population that had increased from 2% to 50% in the last 25 years. Ninety-nine percent of district students receive free and reduced meals at school.

Data collection began following Institutional Review Board approval. Students in a required Career and Wellness course completed written reflections that served as “field texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80). Although data for this study was part of a larger research study including the entire school district, the research team did spend time (weekly to biweekly) throughout the course of the academic year observing and working with students on career development initiatives. At the time of data collection, the research team was not in the classroom; the classroom teacher assisted the research team in gathering this data. Individual narratives for this study were selected based on length of responses (100 words or more) to support rich analysis. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym gleaned from words used in their responses.

**Data Analysis**

The analyst (first author) used Fraser’s (2004) narrative analysis process, an approach that allows the researchers to critically examine underlying social and political circumstances related to the participants’ responses and aligns with an interpretivism epistemology. We chose Fraser’s narrative analysis process because it provides a systematic approach to conducting a critical narrative analysis with infused prompts that support an interpretivism epistemology. Considering the depth of continuity needed to immerse oneself in the data using this process, the team decided to have one analyst. We also decided to assign one team member (fourth author) who has experience as a career counselor, using MCS, and using Fraser’s analysis process to serve as the peer reviewer throughout data analysis. To support trustworthiness, the internal peer reviewer appraised the process prior to data analysis, provided feedback during analysis, and provided feedback on the thematic findings. The analyst and the peer reviewer met to discuss the steps within each of the seven phases and came to a consensus about the process and accountability with regard to journaling; they agreed that the analyst would document responses to all phases in an excel spreadsheet. Fraser’s analysis process is not intended to be a rigid guide for analysts but to provide suggestions to support an intentional critical approach to analyzing. The subsequent paragraphs describe how we adjusted the process to best support the project.

As Fraser’s (2004) analysis process describes, the analyst looked at each case individually during the first five phases and then across cases during Phases 6 and 7. Fraser offers questions to ponder and actions to complete during each phase. Throughout each phase, the analyst read through the transcripts and utilized the agreed-upon guiding questions informed by Fraser’s analysis process when making meaning of the data. Fraser indicated that the analyzer should consider, for example, what is gleaned from each response, how emotions are experienced during and after reading the participant’s words, and how the participant’s words expanded one’s self-awareness. The first phase prompted the analyst to consider where the data was collected and the context of the participant’s story, and to journal about their emotions, shared realities, and any thoughts that emerged from the participant’s story. For example, the analyst journaled about emotions related to the participant’s comments about admiring book protagonists who were successful despite facing racism. This evoked an awareness that even as an 11- or 12-year-old, one begins to grapple with how to navigate harsh realities like racial oppression, adjustment, and loss. This reflection of the participant’s words continued across all phases.

During Phase 2, the focus is on transcribing the data or checking the transcription for accuracy (Fraser, 2004). The participants typed their own responses, making transcription unnecessary, so the analyst and peer reviewer agreed that this phase would involve deep reflection about the participant’s words; the story’s setting, time, common cultural experiences, and type of emotions (i.e., negative or positive) and any contradictions in participants’ stories. This continued into Phase 3, in which the analyst focused on “interpreting individual transcripts” (Fraser, 2004, p. 189). The analyst made notes about common themes across responses to the prompts provided and similar main points, and attempted to identify a singular story. For example, the analyst observed that Heart, one of the participants, incorporated a value of being strong even when facing circumstances not controlled by the individual (i.e., racism).
The analyst spent the fourth phase “scanning across different domains of experience,” namely, intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and structural features in the stories (Fraser, 2004, p. 191). Notably, the analyst highlighted any social structures (i.e., systemic); cultural conventions (i.e., gender, racial, and socioeconomic status); or any references to popular culture. Looking at the whole case, the analyst identified any implications for the features noted and assigned language to common themes present within the case. In the fifth phase, the analyst considered dominant discourses that might build comprehension of the students’ stories; this aligns with Fraser’s (2004) suggested step to “link the personal with the political” (p. 193). In particular, this approach encourages the analyst to critically examine connections with popular discourses to include how realities like oppression, trauma, and sociopolitical circumstances may be described satirically (Fraser, 2004). The sixth phase involved comparing and contrasting each participant’s story to the others, including comparing the themes across cases to identify overlap and differences. This led to the construction of four themes. The analyst shared these themes in a chart with the peer reviewer to provide feedback and ask critical questions like, “How is one theme different from another?” or “Why did you use this language to capture the shared experience across cases?” The analyst completed the seventh and final phase by drafting academic representations or narratives to capture the significance of the Black students’ career stories as viewed through the CRT tenets (i.e., connecting to CRT concepts, language, and descriptions of how racism manifests).

**Trustworthiness.** Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) described trustworthiness as the process of “getting it right” when taking on the task of telling someone’s story (p. 152). Like Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021), Creswell and Poth (2016) suggested that researchers use at least two of the following strategies to increase trustworthiness: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, peer debriefing, triangulation, reflexivity, negative case analysis, thick description, member checking, and external audits. The current study employed reflexivity and peer debriefing to support trustworthiness. Reflexivity was embodied in the researchers’ stance (Merriam, 2009) and was practiced throughout the analysis process via researcher journal notes shared with the peer reviewer along with the emergent findings. As described previously, the role of the peer reviewer supported the credibility of the study by examining and discussing the analyst’s process and emergent findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

**Findings**

The findings from this critical narrative inquiry answered the research question: How do Black youth connect narratives from their favorite stories with their values, interests, and future careers? Overwhelmingly, of the seven participants (see Table 1 for participant names and demographics), many chose a protagonist in a book, movie, or television show that shared their gender (6 of 7) and depicted a nonfictional person (4 of 7). Other comparisons between the participant and the protagonist included a shared racial identity (3 of 7) and similar developmental stage (3 of 7). Table 2 displays the four themes that evolved from the participants and representative quotes: (a)

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**Table 1. Participant Demographics.**

| Participant | Gender | Grade level | Protagonist | Shared gender with protagonist | Shared race with protagonist | Shared developmental stage with protagonist | Book, movie, or television show | Genre |
|-------------|--------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| Heart       | Girl   | 7th         | Ben Carson  | N                             | Y                           | N                                        | Book                            | Autobiography/biography        |
| MLB         | Boy    | 7th         | Jackie Robinson | Y                             | Y                           | N                                        | Multiple                        | Autobiography/biography        |
| Discovery   | Girl   | 7th         | Coraline    | Y                             | Unknown                     | Y                                        | Multiple                        | Animated fantasy                |
| Inspire     | Boy    | 7th         | Plankton from “Spongebob Square Pants” | Y                             | N/A                         | N/A                                      | Television Show                 | Animated fantasy                |
| Kare        | Boy    | 7th         | Bethany Hamilton of “Soul Surfer” | Y                             | N                           | Y                                        | Multiple                        | Autobiography/biography        |
| Faith       | Girl   | 7th         | Izzie       | Y                             | N—or shares with family     | Y                                        | Movie                           | Fiction                        |

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Cross several of her responses. Also during this phase, the analyst documented any comparisons the participants made (i.e., metaphors, similes, and symbolism). Before moving on to Phase 4 and between each of the subsequent phases, the analyst provided initial analysis to the peer reviewer who reviewed the spreadsheet outlining the data analysis process. The peer reviewer challenged some of the interpretations, provided constructive feedback, and encouraged the analyst to think more deeply in subsequent phases.
Persistence against all odds

The participant narratives conveyed a value in relentlessly persisting through adversity when pursuing goals. The theme persistence against all odds captures participant responses conveying a value in being vigilant in one’s pursuit despite internal or external barriers. The ways in which these messages manifested across participants varied in description but this theme was consistent across all youth regardless of gender. For example, Heart chose “Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story” and stated, “Never give up ... no matter how old, big or what race you are” (Heart) “The other team was being racist towards him. . . . He never gave up and was one of the best baseball players” (MLB) “She never backed down even if it took a long time and she kept falling she still got back up on that board and still believed in herself and she achieved her goals” (Faith) “She didn’t care what anybody said or did she knew that surfing was a big part of her life and she didn’t want to give that up even though she had 1 less of an arm she had faith in what she believed in and she knew that she could ride just as well with 1 arm” (Faith) “Even though Plankton was evil he has some good in him and I think everyone has some good in them too” (Kare) “He had determination and mental strength which is something I really want to have” (Heart) “People always go for what they want and never back down no matter what anybody says” (Faith) “Standing up for yourself” (Faith)

Unconditional acceptance and connections

“I would like to be in a place that is peaceful and bright but not too bright with and neutral feel to it. And where I can be myself” (Heart) “I like being in places that are warm, nice, quiet, but still fun. What I am saying is I like being in places that make me and other people belong” (Charity) “Also I like to be in a place where people are kind to everybody not just one or 2 people but everybody . . . and don’t try and back people down, try and boost them up telling them that they can do it and that they can make it” (Faith) “Even though Plankton was evil he has some good in him and I think everyone has some good in them too” (Kare) “He had determination and mental strength which is something I really want to have” (Heart) “People always go for what they want and never back down no matter what anybody says” (Faith) “Standing up for yourself” (Faith)

Self-advocacy

“I like being in places where I feel welcome and comfortable. I would like to belong and be with people that care about me” (Charity) “I like being in places where I can talk to other people. I like to be where I can help people and make them feel better” (Discovery) “People don’t fight all day every day and it a safe and calm and playful environment so the kids can run around and play and have some fun and play games and watch t.v.” (Kare) “She misses her own family. The other mother isn’t what she seems. She is mean and the little girl wants out. She ends up getting her family back and is grateful for her real family” (Discovery) “I would like to be in a place that is peaceful and bright but not too bright with and neutral feel to it. And where I can be myself” (Heart) “I like being in places that are warm, nice, quiet, but still fun. What I am saying is I like being in places that make me and other people belong” (Charity) “Also I like to be in a place where people are kind to everybody not just one or 2 people but everybody . . . and don’t try and back people down, try and boost them up telling them that they can do it and that they can make it” (Faith) “Even though Plankton was evil he has some good in him and I think everyone has some good in them too” (Kare) “He had determination and mental strength which is something I really want to have” (Heart) “People always go for what they want and never back down no matter what anybody says” (Faith) “Standing up for yourself” (Faith)

Tranquility

“I would like to be in a place that is peaceful and bright but not too bright with and neutral feel to it. And where I can be myself” (Heart) “I like being in places that are warm, nice, quiet, but still fun. What I am saying is I like being in places that make me and other people belong” (Charity) “Also I like to be in a place where people are kind to everybody not just one or 2 people but everybody . . . and don’t try and back people down, try and boost them up telling them that they can do it and that they can make it” (Faith) “Even though Plankton was evil he has some good in him and I think everyone has some good in them too” (Kare) “He had determination and mental strength which is something I really want to have” (Heart) “People always go for what they want and never back down no matter what anybody says” (Faith) “Standing up for yourself” (Faith)

Table 2. Representative Quotes.

| Theme                                      | Example Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Persistence against all odds               | “Never give up ... no matter how old, big or what race you are” (Heart) “The other team was being racist towards him. . . . He never gave up and was one of the best baseball players” (MLB) “She never backed down even if it took a long time and she kept falling she still got back up on that board and still believed in herself and she achieved her goals” (Faith) “She didn’t care what anybody said or did she knew that surfing was a big part of her life and she didn’t want to give that up even though she had 1 less of an arm she had faith in what she believed in and she knew that she could ride just as well with 1 arm” (Faith) “Even though Plankton was evil he has some good in him and I think everyone has some good in them too” (Kare) “He had determination and mental strength which is something I really want to have” (Heart) “People always go for what they want and never back down no matter what anybody says” (Faith) “Standing up for yourself” (Faith) |
| Unconditional acceptance and connections   | “I would like to be in a place that is peaceful and bright but not too bright with and neutral feel to it. And where I can be myself” (Heart) “I like being in places that are warm, nice, quiet, but still fun. What I am saying is I like being in places that make me and other people belong” (Charity) “Also I like to be in a place where people are kind to everybody not just one or 2 people but everybody . . . and don’t try and back people down, try and boost them up telling them that they can do it and that they can make it” (Faith) “Even though Plankton was evil he has some good in him and I think everyone has some good in them too” (Kare) “He had determination and mental strength which is something I really want to have” (Heart) “People always go for what they want and never back down no matter what anybody says” (Faith) “Standing up for yourself” (Faith) |
| Self-advocacy                              | “I like being in places where I feel welcome and comfortable. I would like to belong and be with people that care about me” (Charity) “I like being in places where I can talk to other people. I like to be where I can help people and make them feel better” (Discovery) “People don’t fight all day every day and it a safe and calm and playful environment so the kids can run around and play and have some fun and play games and watch t.v.” (Kare) “She misses her own family. The other mother isn’t what she seems. She is mean and the little girl wants out. She ends up getting her family back and is grateful for her real family” (Discovery) |
| Tranquility                               | “I would like to be in a place that is peaceful and bright but not too bright with and neutral feel to it. And where I can be myself” (Heart) “I like being in places that are warm, nice, quiet, but still fun. What I am saying is I like being in places that make me and other people belong” (Charity) “Also I like to be in a place where people are kind to everybody not just one or 2 people but everybody . . . and don’t try and back people down, try and boost them up telling them that they can do it and that they can make it” (Faith) “Even though Plankton was evil he has some good in him and I think everyone has some good in them too” (Kare) “He had determination and mental strength which is something I really want to have” (Heart) “People always go for what they want and never back down no matter what anybody says” (Faith) “Standing up for yourself” (Faith) |
like being in places that are warm, nice, quiet, but still fun. What I am saying is I like being in places that make me and other people belong.” Others like Discovery and Faith described being in places that allow everyone to be themselves, treated respectfully, and supported by the community. Specifically, Faith conveyed: “I like to be in a place where people are kind to everybody not just one or 2 people but everybody . . . and don’t try and back people down, try and boost them up telling them that they can do it and that they can make it.” This care and acceptance of everyone, despite flaws, was also conveyed by Kare when describing a character from “Spongebob Square Pants,” stating, “Even though Plankton was evil he has some good in him and I think everyone has some good in them too.” Participants described in many ways valuing environments that accept them and are accepting of others, which connects with the importance of advocating for yourself.

Self-Advocacy

Prompts from the MCS exercise provoked some participants to emphasize the importance of self-advocating and this was an inner strength they observed within the protagonists. Notably, Faith shared that “people always go for what they want and never back down no matter what anybody says.” Heart said of Ben Carson, “He had determination and mental strength which is something I really want to have.” Some participants viewed self-advocacy as self-preservation, ignoring people who seek to bring you harm while pursuing goals. For example, Inspire shared multiple times that Jackie Robinson “learned to ignore when they called him bad names.” While these statements do not directly use terms related to self-advocacy or self-preservation, they convey a value related to self-advocacy and broadly being steadfast and determined when pursuing your dreams.

Tranquility

Finally, across all cases and often intertwined with other themes, participants conveyed a desire to be at peace in their future workplace and have a desire for a happy ending for their lives even if they need to magically escape. For example, Charity shared, “I like being in places where I feel welcome and comfortable. I would like to belong and be with people that care about me.” Heart conveyed, “Ben Carson’s story really is a happy ending which is also why I love it.” Similarly, MLB stated of Jackie Robinson, “It’s about him growing up and doing good in school and played baseball.” Discovery shared that Coraline was willing to magically escape for peace, “a girl is unhappy with her life . . . she discovers a portal to another dimension.” All participants conveyed thoughts and feelings that reflected a desire to be in peaceful situations. This theme reflects a focus on a desire to be in a tranquil space and time with unconditional acceptance and connections, which conveyed thoughts of being in peaceful relationships where they feel accepted and observe acceptance of others.

Discussion

The narratives of the Black youth represented in this inquiry describe, in their own words, the unique and complex ways in which they connect aspects of stories to their desires for life and future work experiences. Both CRT (Delgado & Stefancie, 2017) and critical narrative inquiry (Fraser, 2004) support the use of counternarratives to glean perspectives not often empirically explored in common career-exploration accounts of Black youth in school settings. The insights garnered from the seven participants support school counselors and related school staff in their efforts to guide Black youth in career exploration. The four themes gathered from this exploration are all interconnected: (a) persistence against all odds, (b) unconditional acceptance and connections, (c) self-advocacy, and (d) tranquility.

The themes of persistence against all odds and self-advocacy connect with permanence of racism, the CRT tenet asserting that racism is commonplace, permeates all aspects of society, and maintains the notions of colorblindness and meritocracy. Meritocracy, the belief that one’s success in school and at work is solely determined by an individual’s aptitude and efforts, has potentially been internalized by the Black youth present in this study (McCall, 2013; Mijs, 2016). Participants shared anecdotes that support a belief that if they merely focus on working hard, they can, like the protagonists in the stories, escape the suppression of racism or broadly ignore it. Representative quotes presented in Table 2 illustrate that Black youth are socialized to persist against or advocate against circumstances that are systemically racist and cannot be repaired by them. For example, the belief of meritocracy is psychologically harmful because the disempowered spend resources (i.e., energy and time) attempting to change themselves to avoid the implications of racism while the empowered rely on the belief, meritocracy, to absolve them from responsibility from benefitting from unjust structures (McCall, 2013; Mijs, 2016).

School counselors, counselor educators, and broadly individuals who work with youth are not immune to adopting these beliefs. For example, the belief of meritocracy is reflected in an instrument commonly used by school counselors, the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College-, Career- and Life-Readiness Standards for Every Student (ASCA, 2021). In particular, Self-Management Skills outlines that students will demonstrate “responsibility for self and actions” and “self-discipline and self-control” (p. 2). Considering these skills through a critical lens, Black youth are disproportionally and inaccurately held responsible for discipline infractions in K-12 settings (Bryan, 2017; Dumas & Nelson, 2016). These standards place great responsibility on the student to overcome oppressive barriers they cannot control and leave little room to question the lines between personal and systemic responsibility. There is not a strong precedence of critiquing the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors in the school counseling literature, but Chae (2020) offers a critical analysis and provides suggestions to help address gaps within the
standards. Notably, Chae demonstrates how the Climates, Attitudes, and Thinking Skills (CATs) model can supplement where the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors are deficient in supporting student success (Kim, 2016). Other common theories used in education, like social/emotional learning, have also garnered a similar critique (Love, 2019). Research outlines many explanations for this phenomenon with one example being adultification, when Black youth are viewed as less innocent than their peers and held accountable at alarmingly higher rates that cause unequal opportunities, school-to-prison pipeline, and even death (e.g., Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Epstein et al., 2017; Washington et al., 2014). The hypersurveillance of Black youth does not begin or stop in educational settings but is reflective of how U.S. culture views them in all aspects of society (Parker, 2017; Washington & Henfield, 2018).

As previously mentioned, most school counselors are White women (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Mitcham-Smith, 2007) and potentially socialized to view Black youth as older and more threatening than their peers and subsequently overpolice because these students should “know better” (Goff et al., 2014). School counselors of color are not immune to internalized oppression that influences them also to overpolice. Although in a different school-related role, teachers of color represented in Kohli’s (2014) study shared that they actively engage in critical self-awareness to combat their own bias and stereotypical thinking. School counselors, regardless of the identities they hold, are responsible for doing this critical self-work so that Black youth, like those represented in the study, do not feel responsible for disrupting the disproportionate realities they navigate (Singh et al., 2010).

The Black students’ responses also connect with a common socialized coping strategy observed among Black people and individuals who live in poverty, known as John Henryism. Sherman James (1996) derived the name for the John Henryism Scale for Active Coping and the concept of John Henryism from a Black American folktale about a man, John Henry. John Henry was a steel driver who won a competition against a steam-powered rock drilling machine but died of a heart attack soon after (Nelson, 2006). James uses this story as a foundation to describe the ways Black people, namely those living with limited resources, use work/drive for success as a coping mechanism to manage the symptoms of systemic oppression (i.e., poverty, unemployment, and racial/social micro-aggressions). John Henryism hypothesizes that Black people who live in poverty experience more psychological stress because they use extra energy to cope with symptoms of systemic oppression (James, 1994). Research supports that this causes hypertension and mental health concerns (Hudson et al., 2016; James, 1994). While these youth reflect on their career stories, they are simultaneously learning from various influences (i.e., parents, peers, and book/film protagonists) that working hard and maintaining a relentless pursuit of success is an appropriate way to navigate systemic oppression, when in fact, over time, it is psychologically and physiologically harmful (Hudson et al., 2016). Further, within the self-advocacy theme, participants indicated their feelings that, if they ignore people who discriminate against them and just work hard, they can overcome obstacles like the protagonists did. This, as mentioned before, means the youth are being socialized to believe they are solely responsible for overcoming the barriers presented by racism. Over time, the process of mentally trying to make meaning of one’s agency to combat racism causes psychological harm or “racial battle fatigue” (Smith et al., 2006, p. 307). Racial battle fatigue is a “cumulative result of a natural race-related stress response to distressing mental and emotional conditions. These conditions emerged from constantly facing racially dismissive, demeaning, insensitive and/or hostile racial environments and individuals” (Smith et al., 2006, p. 307). The desire of this study’s participants to be persistent against all odds also relates to the final two themes, unconditional acceptance and connections and tranquility, and an overall desire to not struggle but exist in peace.

Two themes, (a) unconditional acceptance and connections and (b) tranquility, revealed that Black youth value workspaces that accept them irrespective of flaws, are free of conflict, and where they can work collaboratively with others. Several sociopolitical circumstances can explain the desires of the youth represented in this study. Notably, Patterson and Fosse (2015) described a “triplici discriminate against black youth” (p. 140) because they persistently face barriers (i.e., exclusion and discrimination) that systematically disconnect them from educational and work settings. These disconnections can influence students’ psychological well-being, connections with peers, engagement in risky behaviors, and their work and school aspirations. Despite facing barriers, Patterson and Fosse (2015) asserted that “disconnected Black youth” (p. 10) value acquiring a successful career, but the awareness of their unique barriers is paralyzing (i.e., self-criticism, pessimism, and discontentment). Debilitating pessimism can be a direct symptom of functioning in racist spaces that do not celebrate Black youth as uniquely made and inherently sufficient. Several scholars who have written about Black youth in schools discussed the importance of making space for Black youth to be joyful children where their unique qualities are welcomed and supported, and they are accepted unconditionally regardless of mistakes (Emdin, 2016; Evans-Winters, 2005; Love, 2019). When speaking of Black joy, Love (2019) stated, Black joy is to embrace your full humanity, as the world tells you that you are disposable and that you do not matter. Black joy is a celebration of taking back your identity as a person of color and signaling to the world that your darkness is what makes you strong and beautiful. . . . Black joy is understanding and recognizing that as a dark person you come with grit and zest because you come from survivors who pushed their bodies and minds to the limits for you to one day thrive. (p. 120)

The concept of Black joy connects with desires conveyed by the participants in the representative quotes (see Table 2)
because overwhelmingly they seek places where they can be themselves. Future research should explore the use of other postmodern career tools like MCS (Savickas & Hartung, 2012) and broadly incorporate space for Black youth to verbalize how they make meaning of their thoughts and desires. Narrative career approaches like MCS provide a career exploration method that inherently includes space for students to name and discuss culturally unique circumstances influencing their experiences in future career environments. Research is also needed that explores how school counselors adjust their approach or tools (i.e., ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors) to be culturally responsive when working with Black youth.

The narratives shared by the participants reveal the impact of intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 1995) on the shaping of current perceptions of careers and future desires of vocational spaces. When taking career theory into account, the role of oppression in a youth’s development of a cognitive map (Gottfredson, 2002), for example, is prevalent across the lifespan (Byrd, 2021). Black youth, like those in the present study, exist at the intersection of race, class, and gender, so school counselors’ understanding of oppression is crucial. For example, Gottfredson’s (2002) circumscription theory asserts that as early as age 3, children become aware of the roles adults hold in the world and these observations influence where they see themselves. When considering the weight oppression has on Black youth, as previously discussed (i.e., myth of meritocracy, John Henryism, and racial battle fatigue), the core assertion of career theories like circumscription theory (Gottfredson, 2002) illuminates the importance of infusing an intersectional lens in all career development practices with youth because of their experiences. Our participants made evident that they are seeking examples of how they want to experience the world (i.e., treated, seen, valued, and feel) by highlighting protagonists who may navigate similar racialized and gendered spaces (see Table 1). Narrative career theories and related approaches like MCS provide an avenue to reveal the nuances of students’ unique experiences. Moreover, CRT provides school counselors with a lens to dissect the impact racial oppression has on youth’s development across their lifespan. Like teachers, school counselors are encouraged to develop an understanding of settler colonialism and to embrace critical theories (i.e., CRT, Black feminism, and dis/ability) as their “North Star” when fighting for justice in educational spaces (Love, 2019, p. 12).

Limitations

This study offers empirical evidence to support the need for more qualitative career explorations with Black youth given their unique experiences in school settings. However, limitations exist across all phases of the study. First, we could have explored the narratives of more participants and collected supplemental data related to their stories to increase trustworthiness and richness of the data. During data collection, we did not follow up with the youth to discuss how they make meaning of their responses or allow them to elaborate on their thoughts. Participants responded to the prompts in writing, so a follow-up discussion would have enriched what we gleaned from the experience.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have the potential to assist school counselors in facilitating the career development of Black youth directly and indirectly across all four components (i.e., define, manage, deliver, and assess) of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019). We recommend that researchers continue to explore the use of narrative methods (e.g., card sorts, Future Career Autobiography; Rehfuss, 2009) when exploring career development among historically marginalized youth. We further provide recommendations for school counselors and counselor educators to consider in future efforts and professional trainings.

First, school counselors should contribute to environments that encourage Black youth to be uniquely themselves, where their success is not narrowed to statistics (i.e., standardized tests) or compared to their peers (Emdin, 2016; Love, 2019). Emdin’s (2016) Reality Pedagogy and Love’s (2019) book, We Want to Do More Than Survive, provide strategies school counselors may incorporate to demonstrate through their actions that they value Black youth.

A second important step for school counselors is engaging in ongoing self-reflexivity to examine how their attitudes, beliefs, and biases influence their views of the career aspirations of Black youth (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Singh et al., 2010). Ongoing self-exploration should warrant centering whiteness (i.e., values of meritocracy), interrogating internalized oppression, and committing to unlearning ways of thinking/being that inform images of Black youth as inherently flawed. Resources to support school counselors on this journey include self-evaluation assessments (ASCA, 2018; Hammer et al., 2003; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004) and approaches to combat racism within schools (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020; Love, 2019).

Third, when managing and delivering services, school counselors should use culturally responsive, postmodern career development approaches or instruments, like MCS, that allow Black youth to explore their career options (Albritton et al., 2020; ASCA, 2019; Busacca & Rehfuss, 2016; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005), infuse the advocacy competencies in career development-related group work (Cheatham & Mason, 2021), and consider Cheatham’s (1990) Heuristic Model of African American Students’ Career Development as a guide to infused cultural values and an antiracist lens. As illustrated in this study, Black youth learn that the world of work will look different for them via social messages (i.e., family, media, and observing adults). Byrd (2021) shared participants’ recommendation that high schools provide spaces to discuss vocational-related oppression.

Finally, school counselors should interrogate school counseling techniques (e.g., ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors and social/emotional learning) using a critical lens to circumvent harm. Scholars (ASCA, 2021; Byrd, 2021; Chae, 2020; Love, 2019)
have critiqued and provided resources on how to adjust such theories. For example, for schools that have adopted SEL, the Abolitionist Teaching Network (2020) provides a guide on how individuals can utilize the approach SEL using a critical lens. Chae (2020) provided resources on how school counselors may supplement the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors (ASCA, 2021) to foster positive student growth. However, further critique of the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors is needed. At a minimum, the standards do not consider the oppressive systems Black students navigate and uphold concepts like the myth of meritocracy (i.e., pull yourself up by your bootstraps; Washington et al., 2021). The standards also give little attention to how school counselors may mischaracterize a Black student’s self-discipline, self-control, or coping if not aligned with dominant ways of being.

Conclusion

School counselors’ engagement in career development with Black youth is crucial work. This research highlighting the use of postmodern career development instruments such as MCS (Savickas & Hartung, 2012) demonstrates a culturally responsive approach to guide Black youth by exploring their developing values, which inform what they seek to experience in future career spaces. Moreover, MCS is a tool that can help Black youth explore career pathways in a manner that allows them to self-author their trajectory through narrative. The use of MCS can also create a safe space for students to counter the dominant discourses of Black youth that relegate their experiences to achievement gaps and allow school counselors to see the nuances often missed about their unique desires and needs. These nuances include, but are not limited to, concerns about facing racism, feeling accepted and belonging, or the burden to persist through difficult circumstances. Although techniques like MCS may yield abstract details about a youth’s desires for the future, such a process can help Black youth begin thinking about their self-development, how they want to feel at work, the type of people they wish to work with, and how they want to face challenges. These early and ongoing explorations can empower students and uniquely prepare them as Black youth for careers across their lifespan.

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