

The Development of Critical Consciousness in Adolescents of Color Attending “Opposing” Schooling Models

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Abstract

Critical consciousness refers to the ability to analyze and take action against oppressive social forces shaping society. This longitudinal, mixed methods study compared the critical consciousness development of adolescents of color ($n = 453$) attending two sets of high schools featuring schooling models that represent “opposing” approaches to education. The participating adolescents were 13–15 years old at the start of the study; the majority identified as African American or Latinx; and nearly 80% came from low-SES households. They attended public charter high schools located in five different northeastern cities. Analyses of longitudinal survey data revealed that the adolescents attending these two sets of high schools demonstrated greater rates of growth on different dimensions of critical

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consciousness over their four years of high school. Qualitative interviews with youth attending these two sets of schools ($n = 70$) offered evidence of the long-theorized relationship between critical consciousness and problem-posing education, but also that effective practices supporting youth critical consciousness can be found embedded in schools featuring a broader range of pedagogies. These findings offer support for ethnic studies and action civics programming that several state departments of education have recently added to secondary school curricula.

Keywords

adolescence, civic engagement, education/school, mixed methods, race/ethnicity

Racial and economic inequity are long-standing, pernicious, and intertwined problems in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Piketty & Saez, 2003).
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Importantly, research suggests that critical consciousness may serve as a protective factor for youth marginalized by these inequities in race and economic status (e.g., Cammarota, 2007; Diemer & Hsieh, 2008; Ginwright, 2010). Critical consciousness refers to the ability to analyze and take action against oppressive political, economic, and social forces shaping society (Freire, 1970). For youth from marginalized groups, high levels of critical consciousness have been shown to be associated with a number of key outcomes such as resilience (Ginwright, 2010), self-esteem (Godfrey et al., 2019), curiosity (Clark & Seider, 2017, 2020), academic achievement (Seider, Clark, & Graves, 2020), enrollment in higher education (Rogers & Terriquez, 2013), professional aspirations (Diemer & Hsieh, 2008), and civic and political engagement (Diemer & Li, 2011; Watts et al., 2011). In explaining these relationships, scholars have posited that understanding the causes and social forces underlying oppression can replace marginalized youth's feelings of isolation and self-blame for the oppressive conditions they experience with a sense of engagement in a broader collective struggle for social justice (Ginwright, 2010).

Scholars have long argued that schools play a central role in raising marginalized adolescents' consciousness and commitment to challenging inequity (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 1992; Perry, 2003), and a number of studies have investigated the teaching practices that contribute to youth

critical consciousness development (e.g., Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Kirshner, 2015). However, our research team's 4-year longitudinal project is the only one that we are aware of to compare the role of different schooling *models* in fostering youth critical consciousness development. Accordingly, the present study compares the critical consciousness development of adolescents of color attending two sets of high schools that each featured explicit goals for fostering students' commitment to civic engagement and activism but "opposing theories of action about what a good education entails" (Mehta & Fine, 2019, p. 22). As described below, we found that youth attending these two sets of high schools demonstrated significantly higher rates of growth on different dimensions of critical consciousness over their 4 years of high school. Other studies by our research team drawing on data from this longitudinal project have (a) compared the critical consciousness of students attending these two opposing schooling models at earlier stages of their high school careers (Seider et al., 2016, 2018, 2020b); (b) investigated the critical consciousness development of youth attending individual schools participating in the study (Seider et al., 2017; Seider & Graves, 2020); and (c) considered the critical consciousness development of the full sample of adolescents without regard to their school attended (Clark & Seider, 2020; Seider, Clark, & Graves, 2020; Seider et al., 2019). Below, we report on key findings from these earlier studies and also articulate how the present study advances this earlier work by comparing the critical consciousness development of youth attending these "opposing" schooling models over all 4 years of their respective high school experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Much of the contemporary scholarship on critical consciousness (e.g., Bañales et al., 2019; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Mathews et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2011) is grounded in the work of Brazilian philosopher-educator Paulo Freire (1970), who invoked the term *conscientização* to refer to an individual's engagement in reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. Freire characterized such reflection and action as necessary for individuals to develop a deep and lasting commitment to social change, and he referred to this combination of reflection and action as "praxis" (p. 54).

Building upon Freire's foundational work, Watts et al. (2011) have conceptualized critical consciousness as consisting of three distinct yet overlapping components: (a) critical reflection, (b) political agency, and (c) critical action. Critical reflection refers to the ability to name and analyze forces of inequality. Political agency is the internal belief that one has the capacity to

effect social change. Finally, critical action refers to an individual's engagement in activities that challenge oppressive forces and structures. We describe below the extant research literature on each of these dimensions of critical consciousness.

Although Freire's (1970) work on critical consciousness emerged primarily from his experiences as a literacy educator for adult laborers in Brazil, a growing body of theoretical and empirical scholarship points to adolescence as an important period for the development of critical consciousness. Specifically, adolescence has been theorized to be a period in which individuals are actively seeking out new understandings of the world and their role in it (Erikson, 1968). For youth from marginalized and oppressed groups, such exploration includes recognizing the effects of sociopolitical forces such as racism and poverty upon their lives and communities (Coll et al., 1996). Moreover, the development during adolescence of formal reasoning and abstract thinking skills increase young people's capacity to engage in critical reflection by strengthening their ability to recognize and understand the causes and consequences of such sociopolitical forces (Harrell, 2000; Hughes & Bigler, 2011; Quintana, 2008; Seaton, 2010). Adolescence also represents an opportunity for growth in young people's feelings of political agency and engagement in critical action, as adolescents often possess greater autonomy than children (but not yet the responsibilities of full adulthood) to participate in a variety of forms of civic and political engagement such as protests, demonstrations, boycotts, and political advocacy (Arnett, 2014; Frumkin & Jastrzab, 2011; McAdam, 1986).

In reviewing the extant research literature on critical consciousness below, we also include scholarly work on sociopolitical development. Sociopolitical development refers to the processes by which an individual acquires the knowledge, skills, emotional faculties, and commitment to recognize and resist oppressive social forces (Watts et al., 2003). This concept also has its roots in Freire's (1970) work on critical consciousness (Watts et al., 1999), and in fact a recent systematic review of scholarship on youth critical consciousness included search terms such as sociopolitical development and sociopolitical action (Heberle et al., 2020). Particularly relevant to the present study is a conceptual model of youth sociopolitical development (Watts & Flanagan, 2007) that explicitly envisions a role for schools and other youth-serving institutions in fostering young people's critical consciousness.

Critical Reflection

One dimension of critical consciousness, critical reflection, refers to the ability to recognize and analyze forces of inequality such as racism and poverty.

Freire (1970) posited that engaging in critical reflection was necessary for individuals to appropriately guide their critical action, and other scholars have reported as well that strong critical reflection skills can motivate and direct the social action in which young people engage (e.g., Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Hope et al., 2016). In terms of critical reflection about racism, the Center for Racial Justice Innovation (2017) offers a conceptual framework that defines racism in terms of its interpersonal and systemic dimensions. For adolescents of color, awareness of interpersonal racism entails recognizing that others are likely to define them negatively and see them only as members of a negatively valued group (Oyserman et al., 2001). Awareness of systemic racism entails recognition of how particular policies, laws, and cultural practices can privilege or obstruct the success of particular racial/ethnic groups over others (Gordon, 2013).

The extant scholarship suggests that youth demonstrate increased awareness of both types of racism as they move from early adolescence to late adolescence (e.g., Hughes & Bigler, 2011; McLoyd et al., 2009; Seider et al., 2019). Additionally, a recent study found that Black adolescents ($n = 450$) were significantly more likely to endorse systemic racism than interpersonal racism as a contributor to “race achievement gaps” between Black and White youth and that these adolescents’ attributions of systemic forms of racism increased between the 10th and 12th grade while their attribution of interpersonal forms of racism remained stable (Bañales et al., 2020). Other scholars report that youth of color develop, on average, deeper understandings of racism and racial discrimination than their White peers due, in large part, to their own experiences with racial discrimination as well as racial socialization practices from parents and other caregivers (Bigler et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2007; Seaton, 2010).

In terms of analyzing the causes of poverty, Americans typically offer either individualistic or systemic perspectives to account for differences between affluent and poor citizens (Bullock, 2006; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). A long-standing body of research has found that, on average, American children, adolescents, and adults cite individualistic factors as the primary causes of such differences (Flanagan et al., 2014; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). That said, scholars also report that, with age, adolescents demonstrate an increasing capacity to identify systemic factors that contribute to wealth and poverty (Halik & Webley, 2011; Seider et al., 2019). Scholars also report that adolescents from low-socioeconomic status (SES) families (Flanagan et al., 2014) and adolescents of color (Dalbert, 2001; Flanagan et al., 2014) are more likely than their high-SES and White peers to cite individualistic factors that contribute to poverty. One explanation for these latter findings can be found in system justification theory that posits individuals from marginalized

groups may, paradoxically, possess a greater psychological motivation to attribute differences in people's economic status to personal factors rather than societal flaws because doing so allows for greater optimism regarding one's own economic mobility (Flanagan et al., 2014; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Jost et al., 2009). Another possible explanation is that youth from low-SES families and communities may be particularly likely to receive socialization messages about the meritocratic system in the United States from their families, schools, churches, and other institutions (Lardier et al., 2019).

Finally, given that the present study is investigating Black and Latinx adolescents developing critical reflection about both racism and poverty, it is worth noting that a small body of research has investigated youths' intersectional awareness of these two systems of power (Curtin et al., 2015). Specifically, a handful of studies have found that both Black and White children are more likely to associate Black people with lower economic status than they are White people (Bigler et al., 2003; Elenbaas & Killen, 2016). Another study reported that, between 5 and 11 years old, Black, White, and Latinx children all become increasingly likely to attribute economic differences between different racial groups to racial discrimination (Elenbaas & Killen, 2017). Finally, analyses conducted with four waves of data from the present study found that although the Black and Latinx adolescents in the present study demonstrated positive, significant growth in their awareness of racism and poverty over their first 3 years of high school, there was a nonsignificant relationship between adolescents' rates of change on these measures (Seider et al., 2019). In other words, there appeared to be no relationship between adolescents' changing awareness of poverty and racism.

Critical Action

Critical action refers to engagement in events and activities intended to challenge oppressive forces and structures, and the unequal conditions they perpetuate (Watts et al., 2011). Engagement in such critical action in adolescence has been found to be positively correlated with a range of positive youth outcomes such as curiosity (Clark & Seider, 2020), literacy skills (Conner & Slattery, 2014), academic achievement (Seider, Clark, & Graves, 2020), career goals (Rapa et al., 2018), leadership skills (Nicholas et al., 2019), and resilience (Hope & Spencer, 2017). However, other researchers have noted that youths' engagement in critical action can also be accompanied by emotional burdens such as exhaustion and burnout (DeAngelo et al., 2016).

Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) parse critical action into three typologies: personal action, group action, and the mass action of social movements. Personal action describes the actions of a single individual to protest a policy

or practice, whereas group action entails the collective actions of an organization or collective to stage a similar protest. Finally, the mass action of social movements entails the coordinated efforts of multiple groups and stakeholders to challenge collectively institutional practices or policies. Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) characterize mass action as typically more impactful than group action, and group action as typically more impactful than personal action. Other scholars have distinguished young people's "digital" critical action from (inter)personal and collective forms of critical action (Anyiwo et al., 2020).

Political Agency

Political agency refers to a belief in one's ability to shape and change social and political systems (Beaumont, 2010). Political agency has been found to be a key predictor of important sociopolitical outcomes such as commitment to activism, social capital, and social trust (Beaumont, 2010; Wray-Lake & Flanagan, 2012). Young people with higher levels of political agency are also more engaged in their communities and schools, and less likely to use alcohol and drugs (Peterson et al., 2011). Other scholars report that youths' political agency mediates the relationship between ecological supports (e.g., family, peer, school) and a number of developmental outcomes such as self-esteem, resilience, perceived school importance, and civic engagement (e.g., Christens & Peterson, 2012; Leath & Chavous, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 1999). As described in greater detail in the "Method" section below, the present study conceptualizes political agency as consisting of feelings that one *can* influence political systems (sociopolitical efficacy or control, Peterson et al., 2011) and that one *should* seek to influence political systems (social responsibility, Pancer et al., 2007). In so doing, we follow the lead of Diemer et al. (2017) who characterized this dimension of critical consciousness (also sometimes referred to as "critical motivation") as the interest and agency one has to challenge oppression.

Praxis

In his writings on critical consciousness, Freire (1970) argued that an individual must be able to engage in both critical reflection and critical action in order to effectively challenge oppression, and he invoked the term *praxis* to describe this combination of reflection and action. In recent years, several studies have investigated the relationships between critical reflection, political agency, and critical action. Accordingly, several studies have found that youths' critical reflection skills are predictive of their engagement in critical

action (e.g., Bañales et al., 2020; Clark & Seider, 2020; Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Fernandez et al., 2018), and others have reported significant associations between political agency and critical action (e.g., Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Hope & Jagers, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2019). In short, a growing body of empirical research suggests that the relationships between the various dimensions of critical consciousness are bidirectional and mutually reinforcing.

Schools as Opportunity Structures

In their model of youth sociopolitical development, Watts and Flanagan (2007) posit that youths' critical consciousness development is moderated by the availability of meaningful opportunities ("opportunity structures") for them to engage in critical reflection and action. Regarding the potential of schools and educators to offer such meaningful opportunities, Freire (1973) asserted that critical consciousness is best engendered through a "problem-posing" pedagogical approach in which the educator introduces social issues as problems to be investigated jointly by teachers and students in which "both are simultaneously students and teachers" (p. 72). In so doing, students come to see their community and broader society as capable of transformation, and to see themselves as possessing the capacity to serve as agents of such transformation. Freire contrasted this problem-posing approach to education with traditional "banking" models of education in which teachers serve as authority figures responsible for depositing information into students, and in which students learn to adapt to oppressive conditions rather than challenge them.

Numerous critical pedagogues argue that—because banking approaches to education remain prevalent in primary and secondary schools across the United States—the curriculum, programming, and practices in such schools typically reify or reproduce oppressive racial and economic conditions (e.g., Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1981). Other scholars, however, have reported that school-based programs such as ethnic studies courses (Cammarota, 2007; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020), critical civic inquiry groups (Kirshner, 2015), and youth participatory action research projects (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) can foster students' critical consciousness of racial and economic injustice. Specifically, ethnic studies courses engage students in deeply investigating the ways in which racism and colonialism influence their communities and can deepen participants' commitment to social action challenging these oppressive forces (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Critical civic inquiry can strengthen young people's feelings of political agency by providing opportunities to critically reflect upon oppressive social forces within educational systems and to engage in critical action challenging oppression within their own school community (Kirshner, 2015). Finally, youth participatory action

research (YPAR) has been found to strengthen all dimensions of critical consciousness by engaging youth in identifying a social problem, researching the problem, and then developing, executing, and evaluating a plan to address the social problem (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Other scholars have reported on school-based practices such as critical literacy (Lee, 2007; Mirra, 2018) and critical media literacy (Kelly, 2013; Morrell, 2004) that strengthen students' critical reflection skills by offering tools and space for investigating the codes and messages about race and power included in literary, media, and cultural texts.

Earlier work from our research team reporting on data from this same longitudinal project has also sought to contribute to the extant scholarship on schools and youth critical consciousness development. In one set of analyses, we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) with effects modeling to consider the critical consciousness development of youth attending particular high schools in our study to their peers in the broader sample (Seider et al., 2017; Seider & Graves, 2020). When these analyses indicated that students attending a particular school had demonstrated outsized growth on a particular dimension of critical consciousness, we utilized student interviews and ethnographic field notes collected from that particular school to describe schooling practices that seemed to contribute to youth critical consciousness development. From these studies emerged a number of promising schooling practices such as the opportunity for students to teach their peers and the use of real-world assignments that contributed to students' feelings of political agency and commitment to critical action, respectively (Seider & Graves, 2020). Importantly, these earlier studies differed from the present study in their reliance on an analytic strategy that compared youth attending a single high school with the broader sample of participating adolescents as well as ethnographic field notes data from observations at these schools. In contrast, the present study compares the critical consciousness development of youth attending multiple high schools that can be grouped into two broad, opposing pedagogical models: "progressive" and "no-excuses."

These two schooling models are described in greater detail in the "Method" section, but each represents approximately 10% of the 6,500 charter schools in the United States (McShane & Hatfield, 2015). Importantly, several key features of the progressive schooling model resonate with elements of the problem-posing approach for which Freire (1973) advocated, and several key features of the no-excuses model align with the banking model of education that Freire critiqued. Accordingly, the comparison in the present study of the critical consciousness development of youth attending these "opposing" schooling models presents an opportunity to consider the relationships Freire

(1970) theorized between critical consciousness, problem-posing education, and a banking approach to education (Mehta & Fine, 2019).

Several earlier publications reporting on preliminary findings from this same longitudinal study did not take up this opportunity to consider Freire's (1970) writings on critical consciousness and pedagogy, in large part, because they analyzed the available data through the lens of sociopolitical development rather than critical consciousness (e.g., Seider et al., 2016, 2018, 2020b). For example, we reported at the conclusion of adolescents' first year of high school that youth attending progressive schools demonstrated significant growth in their awareness of systemic racism while youth attending no-excuses schools demonstrated significant growth in their confidence in navigating oppressive settings (Seider et al., 2016). Likewise, another study conducted after adolescents' second year of high school reported that youth attending progressive schools demonstrated significantly steeper growth in their sociopolitical consciousness of racism than their peers attending no-excuses schools, while the no-excuses students demonstrated significantly higher sociopolitical consciousness of economic inequity (Seider et al., 2018). The term *sociopolitical consciousness* was intended to signal that the study considered only the analytic or critical reflection dimension of participating adolescents' sociopolitical development. Importantly, the present study—which considers adolescents' development across the critical reflection, political agency, and critical action dimensions of critical consciousness—reported that these differences in adolescents' understanding of different systems of oppression did not persist over their ensuing years of high school.

Finally, analyses conducted at the conclusion of adolescents' third year of high school found that youth attending progressive high schools demonstrated significant growth in their social analysis skills while youth attending no-excuses schools demonstrated a significantly higher commitment to activism. These findings align more closely with the quantitative results reported in the present study on adolescents' critical consciousness development over all 4 years of high school. Importantly, however, the additional year of qualitative interview data included in the present study both altered and deepened our understanding of the schooling practices contributing to these differences in adolescents' critical consciousness development. For example, a key theme that emerged in interviews with youth attending no-excuses schools at the end of their third year of high school was their participation in a small number of statewide protests for equitable education funding that seemed to have contributed to their developing commitment to critical action. However, interviews with these same young people a year later as they prepared to graduate from high school did not surface these (or other) protests as a key

contributor to their burgeoning commitment to activism. Instead, as described in the “Results” below, participating adolescents cited their participation in several different types of school-based activities as substantive contributors to their developing commitment to critical action. Consequently, the final wave of qualitative data collected for the present study substantively influenced our analyses of the contributions of progressive and no-excuses schooling models to students’ critical consciousness development and also contributed directly to new insights articulated in the “Discussion” section about why these findings should *not* be regarded as evidence of the ability of the no-excuses schooling model to foster youth critical consciousness development or as a challenge to Freire’s (1970, 1973) earlier writings on critical consciousness and problem-posing educational practices. These important points are neither raised nor considered in publications reporting on analyses of earlier waves of data. Finally, one additional way the present study extends this prior work is by drawing on interview data to illustrate and exemplify adolescents’ growth in critical reflection and critical action across five waves of survey data—a synthesis of this study’s quantitative and qualitative data that was not included in previous studies. For all of these reasons, the present study makes a distinctive addition to earlier analyses of data from this longitudinal project.

Current Study

The research questions guiding the present study were the following:

Research Question 1: What differences, if any, emerge in the critical consciousness of adolescents of color attending progressive and no-excuses urban high schools in terms of their ability to analyze and challenge racial and economic inequity?

Research Question 2: How do adolescents of color attending these schools describe and understand the schooling practices that contributed to their ability to analyze and challenge racial and economic inequity?

Based on Freire’s (1970, 1973) foundational work on critical consciousness and problem-posing education, we hypothesized that youth attending progressive schools would demonstrate significantly higher rates of change in their critical consciousness over 4 years of high school than their peers attending the no-excuses high schools (Research Question 1). Likewise, based on research on the two schooling models, we hypothesized that youth attending progressive schools would be more likely than their peers at the no-excuses schools to describe experiential schooling practices such as

Table 1. Participating Schools (N = 6).

School	Pedagogy	Urban context	Students of color (%)	F/R lunch (%)	Mission, philosophy or core values
Community Academy	Progressive: Expeditionary Learning	Large northeastern city	99	75	Philosophy: Develop in students the knowledge, skills, and commitment to envision a better world and work toward achieving it. Mission: To offer students an education that strengthens our community by equipping them to address educational and social inequities.
Make the Road Academy	Progressive: Problem-Posing	Midsize industrial city	100	76	Mission: Community involvement and improvement are central goals at Espiritu Academy . . . Students engage in deep learning and reflection about their own experiences and relationships to others in our community.
Espiritu High School	Progressive: Coalition of Essential Schools	Midsize industrial city	91	78	Mission: To educate socially responsible students for a life of active and engaged citizenship.
Leadership High School	No-excuses	Large northeastern city	100	81	Core Value: We work to improve our community and the world.
Tubman High School	No-excuses	Midsize industrial city	100	77	Mission: Freedom Prep graduates will possess the skills and drive to serve as the next generation of leaders of our community
Freedom Preparatory Academy	No-excuses	Midsize industrial city	99	73	

Note. F/R = free or reduced price.

project-based learning and community service learning that contributed to their critical consciousness development, while youth attending no-excuses schools might be more likely to describe traditional reading, writing, and research assignments that introduced them to different forms of oppression (Research Question 2).

Method

Participants

The study's participants were adolescents ($n = 453$) who entered the ninth grade in September of 2013 at six urban public charter high schools—publicly funded schools overseen by their respective state departments of education rather than by local school boards—located in five northeastern cities in the United States. All of these youth had been admitted to their respective schools via randomized registration lotteries. Within this sample, 196 adolescents identified as male (43%) and 257 as female (57%). A total of 220 (48%) identified as Black or African American; 93 (20%) identified as Latinx; and 140 (31%) identified as multiracial. Nearly 80% of participating youth qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, a proxy for low SES. These demographic characteristics are reported by school in Table 1. We were not able to collect information related to the language, immigration, or generational status of participating adolescents. However, because these adolescents were drawn from five different cities, there was substantial diversity even within the racial-ethnic groups cited above. For example, the youth identifying as Latinx from one city were predominantly first- and second-generation immigrants from South and Central American countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Colombia while the Latinx youth from another city came primarily from Puerto Rican and Dominican American families that had been residing in the United States for several generations. Pseudonyms are used for all participating schools and youth referenced in this article.

Participating Schools

As noted above, the six participating schools were similar in their geography (northeastern U.S. cities), student demographics (predominantly Black and Latinx youth from low-income households), admissions processes (randomized lottery), and school type (nonprofit public charters). Additionally, all six schools featured mission or vision statements that included explicit goals for fostering students' civic development (see Table 1). However, three of these schools were guided by progressive schooling models, and the three others

by a no-excuses model. Below, we describe key features of these two schooling models as well as the six participating schools (see Table 1 for more about each school).

Progressive schools. Progressive schooling models emphasize a caring and collaborative community in which students and teachers work together as partners as well as a curricular focus upon social justice, inquiry-based learning, and deep understanding (Kohn, 2008). Progressive schooling models are not identical to the problem-posing education for which Freire (1973) advocated, but the curricular focus on social justice issues and emphasis on egalitarian teacher-student relationships resonate with the problem-posing approach. The present study included three progressive urban high schools associated with three different progressive organizations. *Community Academy* was located in a large northeastern city and featured an expeditionary learning model that conceptualized powerful learning as involving inquiry and service in the “real world” (EL Education, 2011). *Espiritu High School* was located in a midsize northeastern city and featured the Coalition of Essential Schools’ (2015) emphasis on eight habits of mind (e.g., analysis, empathy) and curriculum “deliberately and explicitly challenging all forms of inequity.” Finally, *Make the Road Academy* (MtRA) was located in another midsize northeastern city and explicitly featured Freire’s (1973) problem-posing pedagogy.

No-excuses schools. “No-excuses” describes an approach to education that seeks to eliminate opportunity gaps facing youth from oppressed racial and SES groups through extended time in school, strict disciplinary environment, direct instruction, and intensive focus on traditional mathematics and literacy skills (Carter, 2000). With its positioning of the teacher as knowledge holder and authority figure, the no-excuses approach is representative of the banking model of education that Freire (1973) critiqued. There is no formal association of no-excuses schools, but *Leadership High School* was located in a large northeastern city and characterized itself as guided by “the best practices of high performing, ‘no-excuses’ charter networks.” *Freedom Preparatory Academy* was located in a midsize northeastern city and cited a “school culture guided by a no-excuses philosophy” among its core values. Finally, *Harriet Tubman High School* was located in the same midsize northeastern city as MtRA and has been cited as an exemplar of “no-excuses” schooling in extant scholarship. The no-excuses model does not definitionally include a commitment to fostering students’ civic development; however, the three high schools in the present study *did* explicitly cite such a commitment in their respective mission or vision statements (see Table 1).

Data Collection

Two types of data were collected for this research study. First, entering ninth-grade students at the six schools completed pencil-and-paper surveys (written in English) in September of 2013 ($n = 453$) that included previously validated measures corresponding with the three dimensions of critical consciousness. These youth then completed this same survey in May 2014 at the conclusion of their ninth-grade year ($n = 445$); in May 2015 at the conclusion of their tenth-grade year ($n = 391$); in May 2016 at the conclusion of their 11th-grade year ($n = 368$); and in May 2017 at the conclusion of their 12th-grade year ($n = 348$).

During the spring of 2014, we also conducted 30- to 60-minute qualitative interviews with 10 to 12 ninth-grade students from each of the participating schools ($n = 70$). Students were randomly selected by our research team from course rosters of ninth-grade advisory periods, and the average interview with these ninth graders lasted approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted by a member our research team comprised of two faculty members, two postdoctoral fellows, and five doctoral students. Demographically, our research team ranged in age from 25 to 45 years old, included two men and seven women, and five African Americans and four White Americans. Each research team member completed approximately five to 10 interviews apiece. We then interviewed 53 of these adolescents again in the spring of their 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade school years for a total of four interviews per student (17 students were no longer attending their respective schools). The protocol for our student interviews was adapted from earlier studies on youth critical consciousness and designed to learn more about participants' ability to engage in critical reflection and critical action. Sample questions from this protocol included prompts such as the following: "Tell me about something in your community or the world that you think is unjust or not right," "Do you think society gives people of all race an equal chance to succeed?" and "What opportunities have you had to participate in changing something that was unfair or not right?"

Measures

This study's survey tool included three measures of youths' ability to engage in critical reflection, two measures of critical action, and two measures of political agency that were all adapted from previously validated scales. Exploratory factor analysis (promax rotation) revealed the items comprising each of these measures loaded appropriately on the underlying factors, and Cronbach's coefficient alpha indicated acceptable-to-good internal

Table 2. Study Measures.

Category	Measure	Adapted from	No. of items	α	Range of factor loadings	Sample item
Critical reflection						
	Awareness of interpersonal racism	Oyserman et al. (1995)	3	.79	0.53–0.61	“Some people will treat me differently because I am (student’s racial group).”
	Awareness of systemic racism	Gurin et al. (2011)	4	.67	0.43–0.54	“Racism in the educational system limits the success of Blacks, Latinos, and other racial minorities.”
	Awareness of systemic causes of poverty	NPR-Kaiser-Harvard (2001)	5	.75	0.42–0.51	“A shortage of jobs is a major cause of poverty.”
Critical action						
	Commitment to activism	Corning and Myer (2002)	9	.80	0.27–0.38	“How likely is it now or in the future that you will take part in a protest, march or demonstration?”
	Achievement as resistance	Oyserman et al. (1995)	4	.78	0.48–0.52	“If I am successful, it will help the (student’s racial group) community.”
Political agency						
	Sociopolitical control	Peterson et al. (2011)	6	.79	0.39–0.44	“There are plenty of ways for youth like me to have a say in what our community or school does.”
	Youth social responsibility	Pancer et al. (2007)	8	.82	0.24–0.41	“Young people have an important role to play in making the world a better place.”

consistency reliability for six of these measures and questionable reliability for a seventh measure (see Table 2 for reliabilities, factor loadings, sample items, etc.). The three measures of critical reflection were the following: awareness of interpersonal racism (Oyserman et al., 1995), awareness of systemic racism (Gurin et al., 2011), and awareness of systemic causes of poverty (NPR-Kaiser-Harvard, 2001). The two measures of critical action were the following: commitment to activism (Corning & Myer, 2002) and achievement as resistance (Oyserman et al., 1995). Finally the two measures of political agency were the following: youth sociopolitical control (Peterson et al., 2011) and youth social responsibility (Pancer et al., 2007). Youth responded to all of the items comprising these measures along a 5-point Likert-type scale in which a “1” represented *no way!* or *not like me at all*, and a “5” represented *definitely!* or *very much like me*. We analyzed participating youths’ shifts on each of these individual measures rather than merging them together into a single composite of youth critical consciousness.

Data Analysis

This project utilized a sequential explanatory analytic strategy in which we first analyzed quantitative survey data to test relationships, and then qualitative interview data to explain and interpret initial results (Creswell & Clark, 2011). We selected this analytic strategy out of a belief that quantitative methods are well suited to estimating the magnitude of change over time but that qualitative methods are well suited to identifying the processes guiding such development (Yoshikawa et al., 2008). For this reason, as described below, we first estimated participating adolescents’ change over time in their critical consciousness using quantitative survey data and then sought to understand the factors and processes guiding this development using qualitative interview data. In so doing, our quantitative findings motivated the themes we explored in our qualitative interview data; however, we also remained open to qualitative results that contradicted our quantitative findings. Mistry and colleagues (2016) assert that such a mixed-methods approach—and the collection of multiple forms of data—is particularly useful for research investigating youths’ understandings of social forces such as economic inequality due to the “complex and sometimes conflicting nature” of young people’s ideas about these social forces (p. 213).

Quantitative surveys. For each of the seven outcome measures, and using all five waves of survey data collected from participating youth ($n = 453$), we conducted longitudinal HLM analyses wherein measurement occasions were nested within individuals. HLM analyses were conducted using the proc

mixed procedure in SAS version 9.4 for each measure in order to consider (a) differences in the mean level of critical consciousness between the two school types (progress, no-excuses) and (b) differences in the mean rates of change on each critical consciousness measure between these school types.

These data would have been best modeled using a three-level model, with measurement occasions nested within students, nested within schools. However, this was not feasible for the current analyses given that HLM is not recommended with $N = 6$ schools. Given that school type was central to the research questions of the study, we responded to this limitation in our data by including school type at Level 2 and focusing more on describing the substantive interpretation of coefficients than their statistical significance. We describe below the model-building process for the two-level models examined.

The first step of our HLM entailed testing an unconditional, intercept-only model, which allowed us to calculate the intraclass correlation (ICC) and assess the proportion of total variance in scores due to between-individual variation. The ICCs ranged in value from .401 to .516, indicating substantial between-student variation in scores. In the current analyses, the Level 1 outcome variables were the various measures of critical consciousness. The second step involved building the Level 1 model by adding a time variable to the intercept-only model indicating the year in which the survey was administered (centered at the most recent measurement period, thus intercepts in these models represent scores at the most recent measurement occasion). At this step, intercepts and slopes were examined to determine whether there was significant individual variability in intercepts (i.e., levels on each critical consciousness measure) and/or slopes (i.e., growth on each critical consciousness measure). Significant variability at this step would indicate the need to treat these effects as random. If this step indicated no significant variability in intercepts and/or slopes, that effect was not treated as random. Finally, the Level 2 model was built by adding student characteristics as predictors of any existing intercept and slope variability such as the type of school (progressive, no-excuses) attended by the participant. Also included in these models were a number of control variables such as participating youths' gender, race/ethnicity, and home city that prior scholarship has found to predict critical consciousness (e.g., Cohen, 2010; Jenkins, 2005). The HLM results presented below are those from the final model tested for each outcome, and included control variables, the main effect of school type, and the interaction between school type and growth where appropriate (i.e., for outcomes where there was significant variability in slopes).

Finally, in our "Results" section reported below, we focused particularly on differences in mean rates of change in youths' critical consciousness

across the two types of schools. Thus, the coefficient for the Year \times No-Excuses interaction was of primary interest, as it represents the difference in rate of change for students attending no-excuses schools compared with progressive schools. This focus was due to the youth in our sample attending the no-excuses schools demonstrating significantly higher baseline scores across all seven critical consciousness measures. A possible explanation for these higher baseline scores was that the no-excuses students in our sample had attended “feeder” middle schools that were part of the same charter networks as their respective high schools and emphasized similar sociopolitical programming. In contrast, the progressive high schools in the study were independent charters that drew their ninth graders from a more heterogeneous group of middle schools. The implications of these differences in students’ baseline scores on the various measures are taken up in the “Discussion” section.

Qualitative interviews. All interviews with youth were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Our analyses of these interviews were a multistep process consistent with qualitative research methods that seek to balance etic/outsider and emic/insider perspectives (Erickson & Murphy, 2008). Beginning with an etic structure, during the spring of 2014, our research team utilized our research questions, interview protocols, and conceptual framework to construct categories that represented key dimensions of our inquiry. Next, we worked collaboratively to populate these superordinate categories with code names drawn from etic concepts in the extant research literature on critical consciousness, critical pedagogy, racial socialization, and civic development, and also emic descriptions by study participants emerging from our qualitative interviews (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Freire Culture Circles) that added depth or texture to one or more of these superordinate categories.

Each qualitative interview was then coded independently by two members of the research team using NVivo Research 10 software. After coding each interview independently, two members of the research team then compared their analyses of each interview transcript, recoded, and then compared again until all coding discrepancies are resolved. Our team then utilized NVivo’s “cutting and sorting” capabilities to compile summary tables for each individual code, organized by the superordinate categories, so as to identify emergent patterns and themes in the coded data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, we focused on themes in the coded data that related to key results emerging from the quantitative survey data. Specifically, as described in greater detail below, we sought out descriptions from participants that offered evidence of their engagement in critical reflection about systemic racism and systemic causes of poverty as well as their engagement in and commitment to

Table 3. Summary Statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation) for Three Key Critical Consciousness Measures ($n = 453$ Students).

Schools	N	Awareness of systemic causes of poverty					Awareness of systemic racism					Commitment to activism				
		T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
Freedom Prep	131/78	3.38 (0.66)	3.35 (0.77)	3.43 (0.81)	3.43 (0.80)	3.51 (0.86)	3.41 (0.66)	3.72 (0.77)	3.62 (0.70)	3.71 (0.77)	4.00 (0.65)	2.98 (0.61)	2.95 (0.70)	3.05 (0.70)	3.10 (0.66)	3.30 (0.68)
Espiritu HS	44/40	3.20 (0.54)	3.30 (0.57)	3.64 (0.69)	3.67 (0.67)	3.90 (0.72)	2.94 (0.56)	3.17 (0.66)	3.44 (0.78)	3.84 (0.70)	3.79 (0.74)	3.04 (0.50)	3.02 (0.43)	2.83 (0.59)	3.11 (0.65)	3.38 (0.77)
Community Acad	41/28	2.94 (0.71)	3.13 (0.75)	3.36 (0.83)	3.58 (0.88)	3.45 (0.95)	3.45 (0.70)	3.42 (0.79)	3.73 (0.67)	3.92 (1.04)	3.81 (0.84)	2.61 (0.81)	2.74 (0.70)	3.20 (0.63)	3.13 (0.70)	3.17 (0.75)
Leadership HS	82/75	3.36 (0.62)	3.25 (0.72)	3.51 (0.70)	3.59 (0.73)	3.92 (0.66)	3.67 (0.66)	3.68 (0.68)	3.72 (0.68)	3.80 (0.67)	3.99 (0.70)	3.10 (0.75)	3.00 (0.76)	3.30 (0.67)	3.33 (0.77)	3.49 (0.71)
Tubman HS	95/74	3.58 (0.66)	3.61 (0.72)	3.76 (0.70)	3.89 (0.68)	3.94 (0.67)	3.74 (0.76)	3.66 (0.82)	3.69 (0.70)	3.97 (0.69)	4.17 (0.65)	3.12 (0.63)	3.11 (0.62)	3.27 (0.69)	3.30 (0.63)	3.46 (0.69)
Make the Road Acad.	60/59	3.27 (0.50)	3.40 (0.72)	3.40 (0.67)	3.50 (0.68)	3.74 (0.68)	3.46 (0.62)	3.85 (0.76)	3.88 (0.79)	4.01 (0.80)	4.23 (0.64)	3.17 (0.69)	3.23 (0.69)	3.07 (0.89)	3.01 (0.75)	3.08 (0.72)
Progressive (Cumulative)	150/126	3.16 (0.59)	3.29 (0.69)	3.47 (0.72)	3.57 (0.73)	3.73 (0.77)	3.28 (0.66)	3.50 (0.79)	3.69 (0.77)	3.94 (0.83)	4.00 (0.74)	2.97 (0.71)	3.02 (0.65)	3.02 (0.74)	3.07 (0.70)	3.19 (0.75)
No-Excuses (Cumulative)	308/227	3.44 (0.65)	3.41 (0.75)	3.55 (0.75)	3.63 (0.76)	3.79 (0.76)	3.58 (0.71)	3.69 (0.76)	3.67 (0.69)	3.82 (0.71)	4.05 (0.67)	3.05 (0.66)	3.02 (0.70)	3.20 (0.69)	3.24 (0.69)	3.41 (0.69)
All Schools (Cumulative)	453/351	3.35 (0.65)	3.37 (0.73)	3.52 (0.74)	3.61 (0.75)	3.77 (0.76)	3.48 (0.71)	3.63 (0.78)	3.68 (0.72)	3.86 (0.76)	4.03 (0.70)	3.03 (0.68)	3.02 (0.68)	3.14 (0.71)	3.18 (0.70)	3.33 (0.72)

Note. HS = high school.

different types of sociopolitical activism. Additionally, we sought out participants' descriptions of teaching and learning practices that may have contributed to the young people at the progressive schools demonstrating meaningful growth in their critical reflection skills and the young people at the no-excuses schools demonstrating meaningful growth in their commitment to critical action. Importantly, we also sought out participants' descriptions of teaching and learning practices at their respective schools that did not seem consonant with the study's quantitative results. This study focuses particularly on differences in critical consciousness development—and potential explanations for those differences—between adolescents attending these two different schooling *models*. In previous work, we have considered such differences across five of the individual schools participating in the study (e.g., Seider et al., 2017; Seider & Graves, 2020).

Results

Developing Critical Consciousness

The descriptive statistics for youths' scores on three key critical consciousness measures included in the student surveys are presented in Table 3 (and the descriptive statistics for all seven measures are available in Online Appendix A). These summary statistics reveal that youth attending both progressive and no-excuses schools demonstrated growth, on average, on all seven of the measures from the beginning to the end of high school.¹ As is evident in Table 4, however, several important differences also emerged between the youth attending progressive and no-excuses schools that we discuss in greater detail below.

Critical reflection measures. The descriptive statistics presented in Table 3 reveal that youth attending this study's progressive high schools demonstrated more sizable growth, on average, than their peers attending no-excuses schools in their awareness of systemic racism and awareness of systemic causes of poverty. For the awareness of systemic racism measure, youth attending progressive schools began their ninth-grade year of high school with a mean score of 3.28 ($SD = 0.66$) and concluded their 12th-grade year of high school with a mean score of 4.0 ($SD = 0.74$). Their peers at the no-excuses schools began high school with a mean score of 3.58 ($SD = 0.71$) and concluded high school with a mean score of 4.05 ($SD = 0.67$). HLM analyses revealed an interaction between school type and time in adolescents' awareness of systemic racism (i.e., $\text{Year} \times \text{No-Excuses}$ interaction). The coefficient of -0.06 ($b_{\text{Year} \times \text{No-Excuses}} = -0.06, p = .007$) represents

Table 4. HLM for Critical Consciousness Measures ($n = 453$).

Variables	Awareness of interpersonal racism						Awareness of systemic racism						Awareness of systemic causes of poverty											
	%			%			%			%			%			%								
	B	SE	t	p	% Red in Var	b	SE	t	p	% Red in Var	b	SE	t	p	% Red in Var	b	SE	t	p	% Red in Var				
Intercept	3.82	0.14	28.27	<.0001		4.16	0.11	39.36	<.0001		3.56	0.11	33.44	<.0001										
Year	0.18	0.02	8.11	<.0001		0.17	0.02	8.91	<.0001		0.14	0.02	7.96	<.0001										
Gender	-0.19	0.06	-3.10	.00		-0.08	0.05	-1.66	0.09		-0.09	0.05	-1.97	0.05										
Latino	-0.19	0.08	-2.37	.02		0.03	0.06	0.51	0.61		-0.10	0.06	-1.65	0.09										
Multiracial	-0.11	0.08	-1.38	.17		0.03	0.06	0.46	0.65		-0.01	0.06	-0.02	0.98										
City1	0.51	0.10	5.42	<.0001		0.05	0.07	0.7	0.48		0.24	0.07	3.20	0.001										
City2	0.08	0.09	0.97	.33		-0.09	0.07	-1.37	0.17		-0.02	0.07	-0.27	0.79										
City3	-0.26	0.16	-1.65	.10		-0.38	0.12	-3.08	0.002		0.32	0.12	2.64	0.008										
City4	0.14	0.16	0.91	.36		-0.16	0.12	-1.26	0.21		0.03	0.12	0.26	0.79										
No-Excuses	0.26	0.12	2.18	.03	1.8	-0.16	0.09	-1.64	0.10	1.7	0.14	0.09	1.49	0.14	2.1%									
Year × No-Excuses	-0.01	0.03	-0.54	.59	<1.0	-0.06	0.02	-2.72	0.007	3.4	-0.05	0.02	-2.53	0.01	5.7%									
	Commitment to Activism						Achievement as Resistance						Sociopolitical Control											
	%			%			%			%			%			%			%			%		
	B	SE	t	p	% Red in Var	b	SE	T	p	% Red in Var	b	SE	t	p	% Red in Var	b	SE	t	p	% Red in Var				
Intercept	3.32	0.11	31.59	<.0001		4.10	0.11	38.48	<.0001		3.81	0.08	43.11	<.0001										
Year	0.05	0.02	2.77	.006		0.02	0.01	1.70	.09		0.04	0.01	5.44	<.0001										
Gender	-0.19	0.05	-4.16	<.0001		-0.11	0.05	-2.09	.04		-0.13	0.04	-3.16	.001										
Latino	-0.03	0.06	-0.54	.58		0.02	0.07	0.30	.76		0.01	0.05	0.18	.86										
Multiracial	0.01	0.06	0.20	.84		-0.12	0.07	-1.83	.07		-0.03	0.05	-0.51	.60										
City1	0.01	0.07	0.17	.87		-0.04	0.08	-0.47	.64		0.05	0.06	0.75	.45										

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

	Commitment to Activism				Achievement as Resistance				Sociopolitical Control						
	B	SE	t	p	% Red in Var	b	SE	T	p	% Red in Var	b	SE	t	p	% Red in Var
City2	-0.12	0.07	-1.76	.08		-0.12	0.07	-1.61	.11		-0.16	0.05	-2.66	.008	
City3	-0.04	0.12	-0.36	.71		-0.16	0.13	-1.23	.22		0.17	0.11	1.58	.11	
City4	-0.28	0.12	-2.30	.02		0.12	0.13	0.90	.37		0.14	0.11	1.26	.21	
No-excuses	0.12	0.09	1.38	.17	1.9	0.04	0.09	0.41	.68	0	0.06	0.07	0.91	.36	0
Year × No-Excuses	0.04	0.02	1.87	.06	2.8	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Youth social responsibility			
b	SE	t	p
Intercept	0.07	54.62	<.0001
Pwise1 (T1-T2)	0.11	3.76	.0002
Pwise2 (T2-T3)	-0.10	-3.04	.002
Pwise3 (T3-T5)	0.13	7.05	<.0001
Gender	-0.18	-4.78	<.0001
Latino	0.06	1.34	.18
Multiracial	-0.08	-1.58	.11
City1	0.07	1.30	.19
City2	-0.16	-2.93	.003
City3	0.14	1.48	.14
City4	-0.07	-0.75	.45
No-excuses	0.09	1.44	.15
Year × No-Excuses	—	—	—

Note. For each of these measures, Year × No-Excuses was only included for the outcomes that had significant variability in slopes (i.e., where slopes were treated as random effects). HLM = hierarchical linear modeling.

the difference in average rates of change between adolescents attending no-excuses and progressive schools when controlling for the other variables in the model, and indicates that youth attending no-excuses schools demonstrated a lesser rate of growth in their awareness of systemic racism over 4 years of high school compared with students attending progressive schools. Concretely, youth attending progressive schools had a yearly rate of change of 0.17 points ($b_{\text{Year}} = 0.17, p < .001$), resulting in an average increase of approximately 0.68 points over the course of their 4 years of high school. Youth attending no-excuses schools had a yearly rate of change of 0.11 points (i.e., $0.17 - 0.06$), resulting in an average increase of approximately 0.44 points over their high school years. The inclusion of school type (progressive, no-excuses) explained 3.4% of the variation in students' rates of change on this measure.

A similar pattern was evident in students' awareness of systemic causes of poverty. On this measure, youth attending progressive schools began their ninth-grade year with a mean score of 3.16 ($SD = 0.59$) and concluded high school 4 years later with a mean score of 3.73 ($SD = 0.77$). For this same measure, youth at the no-excuses schools began high school with a mean score of 3.44 ($SD = 0.65$) and concluded high school with a mean score of 3.79 ($SD = 0.76$). HLM analyses revealed a significant interaction for this measure as well between school type and time in adolescents' awareness of systemic causes of poverty. Specifically, the coefficient of -0.05 ($b_{\text{Year} \times \text{No-Excuses}} = -0.05, p = .01$) indicates that students attending no-excuses schools demonstrated a lesser rate of growth in their beliefs about the systemic causes of poverty over their 4 years of high school compared with students attending progressive schools. Concretely, youth attending progressive schools had a yearly rate of change of 0.14 points ($b_{\text{Year}} = 0.14, p < .001$), resulting in an average increase of approximately 0.56 points over the course of high school. Youth attending no-excuses schools had a yearly rate of change of 0.09 points (i.e., $0.14 - 0.05$), resulting in an average increase of approximately 0.36 points over their 4 years of high school. The inclusion of school type (progressive, no-excuses) explained 5.7% of the variation in students' rates of change on this measure. On neither of these measures was race/ethnicity or gender a significant ($p < .05$) predictor of participants' critical reflection scores. Finally, no meaningful difference was found between the youth attending progressive and no-excuses schools in levels or rates of growth on the third measure of critical reflection—awareness of interpersonal racism.

Critical reflection interviews. Four waves of qualitative interviews with participating adolescents ($n = 70$) offer a useful means of illustrating their growth

in critical reflection about systemic racism and systemic causes of poverty. For example, an adolescent, Marlana, attending one of the progressive high schools explained as a ninth grader that

I think like some people are not always like offered the same opportunities as others because like the majority of the people that are like higher educated are the people that are wealthy, and the majority of people that are wealthy are Caucasians, yeah, and Asians.

In this response, Marlana revealed a burgeoning recognition that there are differences in the inherited wealth of different racial groups in the United States and that these differences have an impact on the opportunities that members of these groups are afforded. As a 10th grader 1 year later, Marlana revealed her deepening recognition of systemic forms of racism and systemic causes of poverty (and the intersection of the two) when she explained:

Even though like, like they say we're all given the same education and stuff like that, not all schools are given the right funding, [or] the right materials and stuff like that for all the students to succeed. And therefore, people like in White neighborhoods, even in this state, the kids in the suburbs are succeeding more than the kids in the city.

Here, Marlana notes that the public school system in the United States provides more resources for youth in wealthy suburbs than in the city and that there are racial differences in the composition of these communities. Finally, 2 years later as a 12th grader, Marlana explained that her city is one

where there is a lot of Latinos and Blacks, or even like immigrants from other countries. And it's cheap to live. You don't need much to live here. [But] like when you're in that type of environment, it's hard to get out of it. So it's hard for people in this city to like start their own business or even invest in other businesses. Like do things with their money or help their money grow. So a lot of people [here] don't accumulate wealth.

In this fourth and final interview, Marlana cited residential segregation by both race and economic status as another example of how systemic racism interacts with systemic causes of poverty to limit the opportunities afforded to people of color. Across these four waves of interviews, Marlana offers a useful illustration of the adolescents in our sample attending progressive high schools ($n = 22$ of 36, 61%) whose interviews demonstrated increasingly sophisticated critical reflection around issues of racism and poverty.

Critical action measures. Descriptive statistics reveal that youth attending this study's no-excuses schools demonstrated more sizable growth, on average, than their progressive school peers on the commitment to activism measure, which represented students' likelihood of engaging in various forms of group or mass social action. Youth at the no-excuses schools began high school with a mean score of 3.05 ($SD = 0.66$) and concluded high school 4 years later with a mean score on this same measure of 3.41 ($SD = 0.69$). Their peers at the progressive schools began high school with a mean score on the commitment to activism measure of 2.97 ($SD = 0.71$) and concluded high school with a mean score on this same measure of 3.19 ($SD = 0.75$). HLM analyses revealed that the school type by time interaction for students' commitment to activism approached significance ($b_{\text{Year} \times \text{No-Excuses}} = 0.04, p = .06$). Specifically, the coefficient of 0.04 indicates that youth attending no-excuses schools demonstrated a greater rate of growth in their commitment to activism over their 4 years of high school compared with students attending progressive schools. Concretely, youth attending progressive schools had a yearly rate of change of 0.05 points ($b_{\text{Year}} = 0.05, p = .006$), resulting in an average increase of approximately 0.20 points over the course of high school. Youth attending no-excuses schools had a yearly rate of change of 0.09 points (i.e., $0.05 + 0.04$), resulting in an average increase of approximately 0.36 points over their 4 years of high school. The inclusion of school type (progressive, no-excuses) explained 2.8% of the variation in youths' rates of change on this measure, and gender was a significant ($p < .05$) predictor of adolescents' Time 5 scores, but race/ethnicity was not. Finally, no meaningful difference was found between the youth attending progressive and no-excuses schools in levels of the other measure of critical action—achievement-as-resistance.

Critical action interviews. Four waves of qualitative interviews with participating adolescents ($n = 70$) also offer a useful means of illustrating their growth in commitment to activism. For example, an adolescent, Jasper, attending one of the no-excuses high schools explained as a ninth grader that racism was a social issue he believed to be unjust but that it was hard for him to imagine getting involved in challenging racism because "I have a lot of family to support." A year later as a sophomore, however, Jasper explained that he had recently participated in a school-sponsored social action project led by seniors at his high school challenging police violence against African Americans. As Jasper explained,

We have something called "Be the Change" projects for the seniors. So I started it already by supporting it . . . Students actually went in front of the police

station and had a “die-in” in a sense. So in it, we just laid down on the floor. I forget how long it was, but we just laid down on the floor.

Here, Jasper described becoming engaged in one of the “Be the Change” social action projects that seniors at his school were required to complete as a graduation requirement. A year later as an 11th grader, Jasper explained that he had recently engaged in activism

[but] not through the school, more like through my friend, Venus. She basically is an advocate for like stopping sex trafficking. So she has fundraisers to like make a movie basically in order to like stop sex trafficking and stuff . . . And I’m also in the process of helping her like develop it, and if she needs anything, I got her.

Finally, a year later as a 12th grader, Jasper described himself as engaged in working with his friend, Venus, on planning Earth Day activities for his community, but also leading his own Be the Change capstone project that supported arts education for youth from low-income families. Across these four waves of interviews, Jasper’s growing involvement in a number of different types of social action offers a useful illustration of an adolescent at one of the no-excuses schools demonstrating growth each year in his commitment to critical action. Jasper’s description of his own growing involvement in activism was similar to a number of his peers attending no-excuses schools in that he cited little involvement in activism as a ninth grader ($n = 31$ of 34, 91%) but then described participating in school-based opportunities for sociopolitical activism in his later years of high school ($n = 21$ of 34, 62%). Where Jasper differed from many of his peers was that that he was one of a relatively small number of adolescents attending the no-excuses schools who described becoming engaged in sociopolitical activism *outside of school* through their family or friends ($n = 5$ of 34, 15%).

Political agency. Finally, in terms of this study’s two measures of political agency, youth attending progressive and no-excuses schools both demonstrated growth, on average, over the course of their 4 years of high school in their feelings of sociopolitical control and social responsibility (see Table 3). However, no meaningful differences were found between the youth attending progressive and no-excuses schools in levels of either of these measures (see Table 4). Additionally, for both measures of political agency, gender was a significant ($p < .05$) predictor of adolescents’ Time 5 scores, but race/ethnicity was not. Specifically, adolescent girls reported significantly higher

sociopolitical control and social responsibility scores at Time 5 than did adolescent boys.

Educating for Critical Consciousness

Given the quantitative findings reported above, we turned to our qualitative interviews to investigate participating adolescents' understandings of the role that their respective schools played in their critical consciousness development. Specifically, we sought adolescents' descriptions and understandings of the programming and practices by which (a) the progressive schools contributed to students' engagement in critical reflection about racism and poverty; (b) no-excuses schools contributed to their students' commitment to critical action; and (c) additional data regarding critical reflection at the no-excuses schools and critical action at the progressive schools.

Fostering critical reflection at the progressive schools. Interviews with youth attending this study's progressive schools revealed that all three schools featured explicit programming and practices for fostering students' understanding of systemic forms of oppression and inequality. These practices took different forms at each school: a ninth-grade Social Engagement course, Community Inquiry Projects completed during students' ninth- and 10th-grade years, and a 4-year humanities curriculum focused on historical and present-day oppression and resistance to oppression. For brevity, we offer a detailed description of just one of these approaches here.

At Espiritu High School, 10 of the 12 interviewed students cited their school's "Community Inquiry Projects" (CIPs) as having deepened their understanding of social issues such as racism and poverty. Community Inquiry Projects were semester-long projects that met one afternoon each week and engaged students in both learning and social action focused on a particular social issue. The projects were developed and taught by both Espiritu teachers, but Espiritu students selected the CIPs in which they participated from a menu of options. CIP topics included Housing & Homelessness, Schools & Society, the Poverty Project, Diver-Cities, Starting a Non-Profit, and Prisoner Pipeline. The Schools & Society CIP focused first on inequality in the United States and then on the purpose of schooling, before concluding with an investigation of the role of schools in disrupting or reifying inequality. One student, Adriana, who participated in this CIP explained in her 10th-grade interview that something she found unjust in the United States was that "sometimes Hispanics don't have the same opportunities to have jobs . . . And like it upsets me sometimes that, why can't we as Hispanics also be as fortunate as those who are not Hispanic?" In explaining

what had contributed to her perspective on racial inequity, Adriana described both the conditions she observed in her own community, but also her Schooling and Society CIP. She explained,

I've had classes like Schools & Society. We talk about how society is nowadays, and the difference like between the women's pay and the men's pay, and Hispanic pay and White pay. And so what I've learned in classes and what I've seen around me, [I] just put it all together.

In this explanation, one can see evidence of Adriana's CIP opening her eyes to systemic factors that contribute to racial inequity in the United States.

Another CIP, Housing & Homelessness focused on housing policies, homelessness, and the relationship between homelessness and food insecurity. One Espiritu student, Nelson, who participated in this CIP explained,

I mean, with the housing, I didn't know it was such a big deal. Like I saw homeless people [when] I was driving or going somewhere, and then I didn't know what they went through. Sometimes I thought when I was little that, if they're there, it's because of their own fault. Sometimes it's not . . . That class just opened my perspective.

Nelson's reference here to re-thinking his inclination to blame homeless individuals for their circumstances highlighted his development of a more systemic understanding of poverty.

Fostering commitment to critical action at the no-excuses schools. Interviews with youth attending this study's no-excuses schools revealed that each of these schools took different approaches as well to fostering their students' commitment to critical action: a Sociology of Change course followed by a semester-long "Be the Change" social action project in students' senior year of high school; a school-wide, semester-long, weekly project period that offered opportunities for critical action; and school-sponsored opportunities to participate in statewide protests. Again, for the sake of brevity, we describe one of those approaches here. Specifically, one no-excuses high school, Harriet Tubman High School, featured a weekly "project period" that was explicitly designed to engage students in meaningful learning outside of the core academic subjects. For this weekly project period, students could choose semester-long electives on topics ranging from cooking to podcasting. Importantly, several of these electives offered students opportunities to engage in critical action.

For example, one elective focused on educating the Tubman High community about equity issues for individuals who identify as gay, lesbian,

bisexual, transgender, or queer (GLBTQ). As part of this project, one student, Marlene, explained,

We went to a Center around the corner from here, and they help out with LGBT members and stuff like that. And I'd always wanted to go like volunteer with them . . . We [also] went to the other high school [in our charter network], and the freshmen, we gave them a forum about LGBT, and we showed them a movie. The movie was basically about if the gender norms were switched, and being like lesbian and gay was the norm. And I think it was eye-opening to them . . . It was interesting to see how they was like absorbing everything that was happening, and they was like thinking about how they gonna apply it to their lives if they see somebody getting like bullied because of their sexual orientation.

Another student who participated in this project, Selena, added that she welcomed these opportunities to engage in sociopolitical activism because

I dislike inequality altogether, having to do with gender, race, sexuality, anything. It just bothers me. So I'm always willing to do . . . anything I could possibly do to make people feel comfortable, or make things a little better.

Another project engaged students in investigative journalism focused on the issue of gentrification within their city. Tubman student Melissa explained,

Me and another girl did gentrification and how it was related to like the arts, and how artists were causing gentrification by like moving here and like setting up shops. And then another girl did gentrification and like race. And like we just did like different groupings and how it affected like the work industry and all that.

Melissa added that she took away from this project

how to, like, investigate. Cause it was like investigative reporting. We made phone calls to people to try to see if they knew about what we were trying to write about, and like researching online and finding the best articles.

Students participating in this project sought to influence their community as well by publishing a special issue of their school newspaper focused on how gentrification was reshaping their community.

Additional interview data. We also considered themes in our qualitative interview data that did not align with our quantitative findings. For example, several young people at one of the progressive schools, Espiritu High School,

described meaningful school-based opportunities to engage in critical action. Espiritu student Jada explained that “the best experience of my life” was joining a group of classmates and a faculty member in attending the 2017 Women’s March in Washington DC 1 day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump. Jada added, “Now that I got to experience that, it’s motivated me to do more, cause like now I know I can do something about it, even if it’s just going to a protest.” Jada unequivocally characterized this opportunity sponsored by her progressive-oriented school as having strengthened her commitment to sociopolitical activism. Likewise, adolescents at another progressive school, Community Academy, pointed to letters they had written to elected representatives as part of a humanities unit on colonialism as strengthening their belief in the importance of critical action. One adolescent, Dana, said of her letter to her congressperson about the United States’s relationship with Puerto Rico: “I feel like, if we send out these letters, then it would make some type of improvement to what’s happening.”

Likewise, a number of students at Harriet Tubman High School, one of the no-excuses schools, described opportunities to engage in critical reflection of racial injustice in an African American Literature elective course that included books such as James Baldwin’s (1962) *Another Country* about race relations in the United States. Tubman student Julius said of reading *Another Country*: “I just think that it kinda gave me more insight into the world and how reality works because there’s a lot of stuff in the book *Another Country*, a lot of interracial relationships, interracial interactions.” For Julius and other Tubman students, African American Literature deepened their understanding of an America shaped by a long and ongoing history of racial injustice. Likewise, students at another no-excuses school, Leadership High School, pointed to readings in a similar elective for upperclassmen, “The Black Experience,” as offering opportunities to consider the effects of racism in various social systems. For example, one Leadership student, Venice, cited one of this course’s texts, Michelle Alexander’s (2010) *The New Jim Crow* as having “opened my mind to the world.” Students at the third no-excuses school, Freedom Prep, offered similar descriptions of an 11th-grade Civics course that engaged them in reading and debating the competing explanations for racial inequity offered by scholar Cornel West and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates. We consider these additional data as well in the “Discussion” section below.

Discussion

The present study compared the critical consciousness development of adolescents of color over 4 years of high school who attended high schools featuring

explicit goals for youth civic development but which took “opposing” pedagogical approaches to this work (Mehta & Fine, 2019). While our research team has reported in previous studies on adolescents’ critical consciousness development at earlier stages of high school, the analyses reported in the present study are the first to compare these youth over the full span of their high school years. Importantly, these additional waves of quantitative and qualitative data revealed that youth attending these two sets of schools demonstrated greater rates of growth on different dimensions of critical consciousness, but that *both* sets of schools were drawing upon problem-posing educational practices to support their respective students’ critical consciousness development. In so doing, the present study offers important updates on findings reported from earlier waves of data that did not persist over adolescents’ 4 years of high school (e.g., Seider et al., 2016, 2018) and new insights into how these different schooling models contributed to students’ critical consciousness development. The present study also synthesizes survey and interview data to clarify what such critical consciousness development looks and sounds like. Finally, because the present study explicitly considers these data through the lens of Paulo Freire’s (1973) critical consciousness framework, we seek in this “Discussion” section to consider the implications of this study’s findings with regard to Freire’s (1970) writings on the ability of banking and problem-posing models of education to support critical consciousness development.

Growth in Different Dimensions of Critical Consciousness

Our HLM analyses revealed that youth attending the progressive schools in the present study demonstrated significantly greater rates of growth on two measures of critical reflection than their peers attending the no-excuses schools. We also illustrated this growth in critical reflection of adolescents attending progressive high schools through the example of Marlana, a progressive high school student who shifted over 4 years of high school from acknowledging differences in the economic status of privileged and marginalized racial groups in the United States to articulating precisely how public education systems and residential segregation practices contributed to those inequities. The combination of this survey and interview data highlighted the ways in which adolescents attending this study’s progressive high schools were developing deeper understandings of systemic racism and systemic causes of poverty over 4 years of high school. These findings also offer an important update on analyses conducted midway through adolescents’ high school years that found students attending progressive and no-excuses high schools demonstrated significant growth in their critical reflection on different types of oppression (Seider et al., 2018)—a finding that did not persist over students’ ensuing years of high school.

HLM analyses also revealed that youth attending the no-excuses schools in the present study demonstrated a greater rate of growth approaching statistical significance in their commitment to critical action than their peers at the progressive schools. Likewise, we illustrated this growth in no-excuses students' commitment to critical action through the example of one no-excuses school student, Jasper, who shifted from reporting little interest in social action as a ninth grader to actively engaging in sociopolitical activism through school-based opportunities as a sophomore and then via his friends on their own initiative as an 11th and 12th grader. The combination of these data is well served to illustrate the ways in which adolescents attending no-excuses high schools in the present study demonstrated meaningful growth in their commitment to critical action over their 4 years of high school. These findings also offer an important update on analyses conducted after adolescents' first year of high school that suggested youth attending no-excuses schools were developing skills related to navigating rather than challenging oppression (Seider et al., 2016)—a finding that did not persist over participants' ensuing years of high school.

To consider these key findings through the lens of Freire's (1970, 1973) foundational work on education and critical consciousness, recall that Freire (1970) argued critical consciousness is best engendered through a problem-posing education in which teachers and students work together to investigate and challenge social problems shaping their communities. This connection that Freire posited between critical consciousness and problem-posing education has guided much of the work by contemporary scholars on fostering youth critical consciousness both inside and outside of traditional school spaces (e.g., Cammarota, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kirshner, 2015).

Given the similar emphases in problem-posing and progressive schooling approaches on egalitarian teacher-student relationships and social justice curriculum, one might describe this study's first key finding—that young people attending progressive schools demonstrated significantly higher rates of change in their ability to analyze racial and economic injustice—as resonant with the extant scholarship on critical consciousness and pedagogy. More specifically, one might point to the progressive schools' incorporation of programming such as the Community Inquiry Projects at Espiritu High School as an example of problem-posing education that effectively engaged students in critical reflection upon oppressive social forces shaping their communities. As noted in our "Results" section, there *were* opportunities in the no-excuses schools for students to engage in critical reflection about oppressive social forces (e.g., courses on African American Literature, The Black Experience, and Civics). However, these opportunities at the no-excuses

schools seemed both smaller in scope and less embedded in the school's core programming than the opportunities for critical reflection at the progressive schools. It is notable, for example, that the opportunities for critical reflection cited by adolescents at the three no-excuses schools all occurred in stand-alone courses at the end of students' high school experiences. In contrast, the examples offered by students from the progressive schools (e.g., Social Engagement, Community Inquiry Projects) occurred at the beginning of students' high school experiences and, consequently, could inform and shape the direction of students' learning experiences over their subsequent years of high school.

Critical Consciousness and No-Excuses Schools

This study's second key finding—that youth attending no-excuses schools demonstrated higher rates of change in critical action than their progressive school peers—seems initially to challenge the extant scholarship on critical consciousness and pedagogy. As noted in the introduction, Freire (1970) asserted in his foundational writings on critical consciousness that the banking approach to education found in most primary and secondary schools is antithetical to the development of students' critical consciousness. According to Freire, the banking approach positions teachers as authority figures responsible for depositing information into students, and, in so doing, teaches students to adapt to oppressive conditions rather than challenge them. Given that the no-excuses schooling model embraces both direct instruction and the teacher-as-authority-figure, one might initially interpret the meaningful growth in critical action demonstrated by the youth attending this study's no-excuses schools as a challenge to Freire's foundational work on pedagogy and critical consciousness. However, interviews with youth attending the no-excuses schools revealed that several of these schools had adopted a small set of programming that incorporated elements of problem-posing education. For example, as noted above, students attending two of the no-excuses schools cited semester-long social action projects as having contributed to their development of a commitment to critical action—a key dimension of critical consciousness. Perhaps most notable in youths' descriptions of these semester-long projects at their respective no-excuses high schools was that these projects offered youth more opportunities than the rest of the school's curriculum for choice and autonomy, to co-construct their learning experience, and to engage in authentic sociopolitical activism in their communities. Put another way, one might characterize these learning opportunities as far closer to a problem-posing approach to education than was typically found at these schools in particular and in no-excuses schools more broadly.

Consequently, the fact that students in both of these no-excuses schools pointed to these learning experiences to explain their respective schools' contributions to their critical consciousness suggests that this study's results should not be taken as support for the ability of the no-excuses *model* to foster youth critical consciousness. In other words, the results of the present study cannot refute claims that the no-excuses model is incompatible with critical consciousness development (e.g., Levinson, 2012; Sondel, 2016) because the programming that youth in these no-excuses schools characterized as "opportunity structures" for their critical consciousness development seemed to represent problem-posing practices embedded within a broader no-excuses schooling context (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

If the results of the present study do not confirm the ability of the no-excuses model to foster youth critical consciousness development, might they instead be taken as evidence that individual no-excuses schools can take up specific practices that run counter to the broader approach of the schooling model and, in so doing, exert positive effects on key dimensions of youth critical consciousness? Put another way, do these findings raise the possibility that schools featuring a banking approach to education can embed problem-posing practices into their curriculum or programming that contribute meaningfully to their students' growth in particular dimensions of critical consciousness?

Two caveats related to such conclusions are that the meaningful growth in critical action demonstrated by adolescents attending no-excuses schools in the present study only approached statistical significance and was not accompanied by similar growth in these young people's feelings of political agency. Given prior research demonstrating positive associations between young people's commitment to critical action and feelings of political agency (e.g., Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Hope & Jagers, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2019), one might have expected that young people in the present study demonstrating meaningful growth in their commitment to critical action would also demonstrate similar growth in their feelings that they can influence political systems (Peterson et al., 2011) and should influence political systems (Pancer et al., 2007). However, the growth in political agency of adolescents attending no-excuses schools in the present study did not differ significantly from that of their peers attending progressive schools. And, in fact, summary statistics revealed that adolescents attending no-excuses schools actually concluded high school with, on average, lower scores on both measures of political agency than their peers attending progressive schools.

Perhaps one reason that no-excuses students in the present study did not demonstrate meaningful rates of change in their feelings of political agency was because their opportunities to engage in critical action occurred within

no-excuses schooling contexts that did not more broadly encourage student autonomy, voice, and choice. Freire (1970) describes such schooling contexts as antithetical to critical consciousness development in that students from oppressed groups are taught to adapt to their conditions rather than coming to see themselves as possessing the capacity to serve as agents of societal transformation. In other words, several of the no-excuses schools included in the present study may have included a few discrete opportunities for engaging in critical action that strengthened participating adolescents' developing commitment to critical action, and which participating adolescents themselves cited as deepening their commitment to engaging in critical action. However, the critical consciousness development of these young people attending no-excuses schools was not simultaneously supported by a schooling context that offered widespread opportunities for critical reflection or which encouraged their feelings of political agency. Accordingly, there is reason to be skeptical whether the "piecemeal" incorporation of problem-posing educational practices at several of the no-excuses schools in the present study can support adolescents' development of the full constellation of skills and commitments that Freire (1970) characterized as essential for critical consciousness and personal and societal liberation.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to the present study such as the lack of random assignment to the two school types. Although youth were admitted to all six schools via randomized registration lotteries, it is possible that youth were differentially likely to enter lotteries for enrollment in these different schooling models. A second limitation was that the relatively small number of schools in our study prevented us from modeling our quantitative data with a three-level model that accounted for youth being nested within schools. A third limitation was the relatively low internal consistency reliability of the study's awareness of systemic racism measure. As noted in the "Method" section, a fourth limitation is that students at no-excuses schools began their first year of high school (Time 1) with significantly higher scores on all seven critical consciousness measures than their peers attending the progressive schools. We noted that this difference could be due to the majority of no-excuses students attending "feeder" middle schools within the same charter networks as their respective high schools and cited these higher baseline scores as an important reason to focus on students' rate of change on these measures. That said, the significantly lower baseline scores of students attending the progressive schools meant that these students had a greater opportunity to demonstrate steeper growth on the study measures over their 4

years of high school. Additional research might address this limitation by comparing youth at the participating schools with peers who registered for the randomized lotteries at these schools but were not admitted. Finally, our decision to utilize a sequential exploratory analytic strategy that began with the quantitative analyses may have narrowed the lens with which we considered our student interview data. Despite explicitly seeking out contradictory and discrepant data, this approach may have resulted in us overlooking patterns and themes that might otherwise have emerged from these student interviews.

Implications

Scholars have long argued that schools have an important role to play in strengthening marginalized youths' capacity to analyze and challenge economic and racial inequity in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 1992; Perry, 2003). Results from the present study underscore the impact upon young people's critical consciousness development of schooling practices that value and draw upon the lived experiences students bring with them into the classroom, and which offer students opportunities to learn and apply civic skills. Accordingly, these results offer important support to state departments of education that have sought in recent years to make ethnic studies coursework (e.g., California) and action civics programming (e.g., Massachusetts) graduation requirements for all high school students (Blume & Agrawal, 2019; Jennings, 2018). At the same time, the results of the present study also stand as a reminder of Freire's (1970) assertions that powerful critical consciousness development comes about, not in a single course or from an isolated schooling practice, but rather in educational contexts that offer rich opportunities for both critical reflection and critical action. Such rich contexts have the potential to support youth from marginalized racial and economic groups in developing the "psychological armor" necessary to navigate and challenge the oppressive social forces shaping our lives and communities (Phan, 2010).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. Although not included in this article for parsimony, the model-building that was part of our hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analyses revealed that the overall change over time for all students in the sample (and with no other variables except Year included in the model) was significant for all measures except achievement-as-resistance and youth social responsibility.

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