
Reimagining Approaches to Out-of-School Time Spaces That Center Youth

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The beginning of 2020 marked the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and a new reality. Mainstream learning loss discourse emerged as young people faced new social challenges and rising inequities. However, how we define some of these challenges may pose new barriers to equity promotion. Deficit-based narratives often negatively construct youth identities and intertwine with neoliberal forces and systemic inequities. Out-of-school time (OST) spaces offer hope and opportunity for a re-envisioned environment to centralize youth voice and provide critical time for leisure and reconnection. In this article, authors explore the strategies that can exist between youth workers and social workers in cultivating OST spaces for young people to engage with complex social justice development in humane, nurturing, and respectful environments. Authors center the argument for shifting away from extractive neoliberal models that commodify youth, the importance of becoming cognizant of OST's impact on young people's development, and raising awareness of the possibilities within OST spaces through youth-focused frameworks.

KEY WORDS: *leisure; out-of-school time; social workers; youth development; youth workers*

As the persistent ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic alter society, new challenges in schools and out-of-school time (OST) spaces impact youth. OST references the hours young people are not in school and engaging in various activities (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2003). Currently, 7.8 million young people are enrolled in OST programming compared with 10.2 million in 2014 (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). While OST spaces provide resources such as youth supervision, identity support, food security, job opportunities, and professional development (McCombs et al., 2017), many OST spaces have become “out of time” spaces, where the valorization of data and test scores co-opts and steals time away from holistic forms of development and healing (Baldrige, 2020; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Furthermore, OST leaders have expressed their concerns about the sustainability of their programming amid COVID, citing their worries about permanently shutting their space and having long-term funding plans dictating their programs' futures (Afterschool Alliance, 2020).

To understand the effects of the pandemic on youth learning, researchers proposed predictions and estimates of pandemic learning, resulting in

sensationalized narratives of “learning loss” (i.e., math and reading declines) for all youth (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Deficit-based narratives of learning loss overshadow alternative learning and growth outside schools (McKinney de Royston & Vosoughi, 2021). Meanwhile, the neoliberal gaze attached to learning loss is driven by notions of “failure,” “at-risk” conceptualizations, and blame, often disproportionately affecting youth minoritized by their identities (Mitchell & Greer, 2022). The overreliance on academic-centric notions of achievement—shaped by an intensifying neoliberal state—rewards those who pathologize youth, perpetuating a hyper-focus on testing, and narrowly aims to “fix” and “save” young people through a white supremacist rationale (Baldrige, 2019). Neoliberalism (e.g., rigid academic focus) and deficit-based frameworks (e.g., at-risk) have infiltrated school spaces—siphoning public education funds and privileging charter schools (Giroux, 2022). Meanwhile, OST spaces are increasingly influenced by *neoliberalism*, defined as a market-based ideology leading to narratives of fear and deficiency used to marginalize youth and justify an increased academic focus, ultimately de-emphasizing youth-centered spaces (Kwon, 2013).

While the insidious reach of neoliberalism is apparent across PreK–12 schools and OST organizations, it is necessary to differentiate these youth-serving spaces. PreK–12 schools distinctly hold a history of upholding deficit framings that buttress white supremacy by constructing positive environments for nonminoritized young people (Anderson, 2010), while minoritized youth obtain comparatively fewer affirmations, acknowledgments, and support around exploring their numerous identities such as race, sociopolitical status, and gender (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Patel, 2016). For instance, McCarty–Caplan (2013) illuminates how school climate and educators can potentially cultivate hostile environments for minoritized youth exploring gender and sexuality. Hope et al.’s (2015) youth participatory action research adds to this sentiment by highlighting the lack of in-school support for race, culture, and diversity topics that young people voiced in the study’s interviews.

As the literature showcases, a foundational difference exists between schools and OST spaces regarding a lack of intentionality in supporting marginalized youth and acknowledging young people’s multiple identities (e.g., race, sociopolitical status, gender, sexuality). Numerous OST sites reject the dehumanizing standards within the PreK–12 schooling sphere by intentionally crafting spaces for the exploration of young people’s lives through practices such as constructing counternarratives against deficit tropes in school spaces and providing reflection activities for youth to critically examine their worldview (Akiva et al., 2017).

Another distinctive characteristic within the OST context is the potential partnership between young people and youth workers (adults). Youth workers’ multifaceted roles (e.g., mentoring, counseling, and advocating) position them to have rich relationships with young people not necessarily available in traditional school spaces (Bonfiglio, 2017). While educators in school settings have the same relationship-building potential, they must traverse bureaucratic barriers that limit these potential relationships. Thus, youth workers’ roles inherently position them to potentially recognize young people as valuable knowledge producers while also incorporating them into the program construction process (Wu et al., 2016). For example, Bax and Ferrada’s (2018) educator reflections showcase how “formal” PreK–12 educators grapple with the philosophical tensions of engaging young people authentically within a

youth-centered OST space. As educators within traditional education spheres grapple with these tensions, youth-centered philosophies can more freely move toward recognizing the specific needs of young people within OST contexts. Thus, the distinction between OST spaces and schools manifests in how young people receive support.

This article supplants pathologizing perspectives with inclusive, asset-based, holistic, support-driven, and youth-voice-centered ideology. Throughout this article, we outline the utility of OST spaces where youth are free to move, design activities, share stories, and experience leisure from the challenges of academic schooling and the ramifications of the neoliberal state (Giroux, 2022). We argue that youth do not need saving—instead, they deserve their childhood (and time) back. Through this argument, we illuminate pathways for reimagining and preserving OST spaces for young people navigating a system driven by neoliberalism.

To understand the hope and opportunity in OST spaces, we look first at the frameworks and historical aspects that have shaped our current environment. We then outline the value of emphasizing youth voice and the benefits of transformative socioemotional learning (SEL). We also highlight the social justice youth development (SJYD) model alongside other youth-focused solutions. Herein, we review the rise of neoliberalism in educational spheres, deficit-based ideology, and the nonprofit funding paradox. We conclude by discussing OST spaces as a critical resource to enable leisure-based, holistic support and youth-driven frameworks.

POSITIONALITY

Awareness of an author’s positionality is vital in understanding the crafting of arguments across a text. The first author identifies as a Black, cisgender man with a youth work background and formal teaching across numerous urban contexts. These experiences ground his critical epistemological stance in examining issues across the education field. The second author builds on this stance through her labor of contributing to the development, implementation, and evaluation of programming that provides spaces for community engagement, participatory research, and collective healing among youth communities. As a White transgender female, she prides herself on engaging youth voices in their education, their health, and their political power through processes of social and emotional coregulation, group model

building, and storytelling. Finally, third author, who identifies as White and male, is a doctoral candidate in social work whose passion for holistic youth-centric educational spaces is shaped by his experiences and research that recognizes how aspects of neoliberalism tend to pathologize and dehumanize youth to maintain academic rigidity and allegiance to elite power structures.

METHOD

We took an interdisciplinary approach to review the literature across methodologies and academic disciplines pertaining to OST, neoliberalism, and young people. Texts about qualitative, quantitative, historical, and conceptual approaches provided an overview of the substantive findings, trends, and manners in which inquiry regarding youth in OST contexts occurs. Consistent with other review procedures (e.g., Cooper, 1982), we developed criteria for excluding and including texts to tighten the scope of analysis. We proceeded with this exploration by grouping the literature into three overarching themes: (1) neoliberalism in educational spheres, (2) educational inequities and deficit-based ideology, and (3) the nonprofit funding paradox.

Neoliberalism in Educational Spheres

Over the past few decades, neoliberal ideology has impacted educational policy, research, and professional practices (Giroux, 2022). Neoliberalism encapsulates market-based strategies posed as solutions (e.g., school choice; testing) to address the disasters caused by capitalism (Saltman, 2015). In schools, neoliberal aspects include a hyperfocus on academic achievement, competition, youth commodification, and the privatization of educational spheres, including privileging the charter school movement (Lipman, 2013). For example, solutions to “address learning loss” have essentially encapsulated increases in high-stakes testing and tutoring—facilitated by corporate privatization and education consulting groups intending to profit off young people (Mitchell & Greer, 2022).

Neoliberal trends profoundly impact schools and privatization mechanisms but also affect OST spaces and holistic youth development (Baldrige, 2019). Narratives of failure depict both public school systems and youth identities and have historically received reinforcement from an “enduring” academic achievement gap (Saltman, 2015). These narratives

of failure force youth within schools into states of surveillance and control (e.g., recommendations for law enforcement within “low-performing” schools) that frame young people as problems due to their backgrounds (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2018) or due to expressed behaviors in school environments that are natural and sometimes critically necessary responses to ongoing chronic trauma within or outside of school (Kagan et al., 2022).

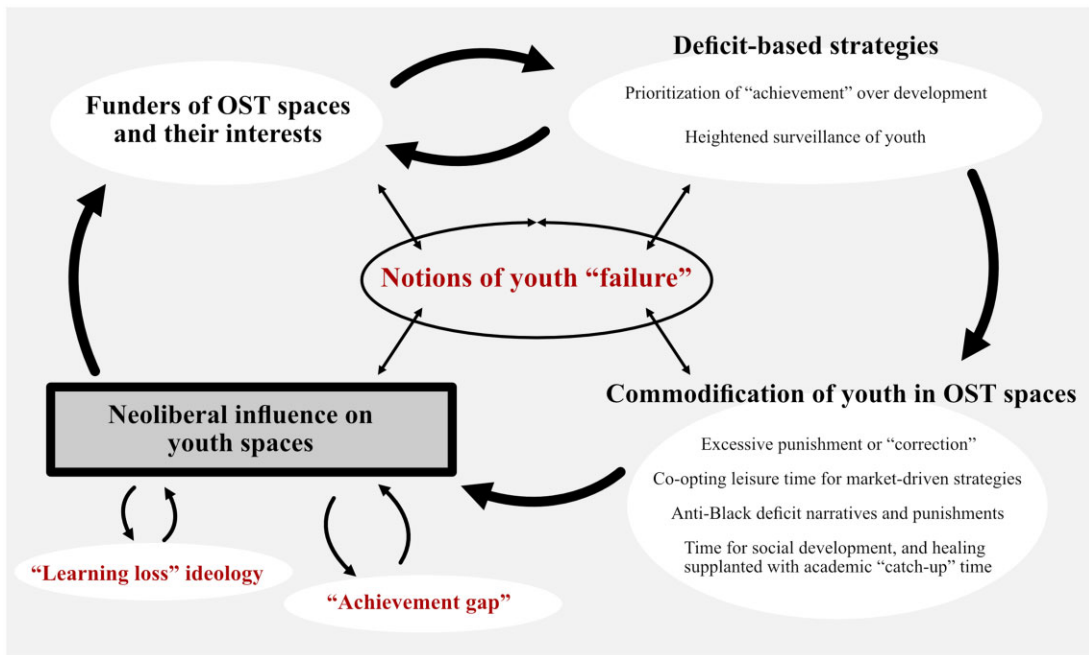
From there, policy, research, and practice have focused on “closing the achievement gap” and other deficit framings that have infiltrated OST spaces. For instance, Baldrige (2020) contends that ongoing actions within OST spaces often proliferate anti-Black deficit narratives through the structured ignorance of White liberals. Meanwhile, youth voices become silenced as a rigid academic focus precedes their developmental needs. The significance of young people’s developmental trajectory ends up being replaced by a market-driven emphasis on higher test scores and/or evaluation statistics that align with the goals of a deficit-driven educational system (Valencia, 2010). We illustrate the cyclical impact of this ideological prioritization and its outcomes in youth spaces in Figure 1.

Neoliberal trends deeply affect OST spaces because the same corporate interests that drive narratives of failure, provide funding to address problems, design curricula, and dictate what reform looks like also shape youth-serving spaces (Baldrige, 2019). OST spaces offer tremendous hope and opportunity to circumvent these deficit-based frameworks, where youth can be cherished and included without co-opting their time and childhood (Kwon, 2013). This hope, however, is under tremendous threat as ideologies of failure and “closing the gap” coerce and control OST spaces to fit a neoliberal agenda.

Educational Inequities and Deficit-Based Ideology

Educational inequities shape the need for holistic, youth-centered OST spaces while informing the policy, research, practices, and funding structures that mechanize deficit-based mentalities and recapitulate oppressive and pathologizing experiences for youth (Kwon, 2013). Deficit-based ideology entails pathologizing perspectives that blame young people, circumvent structural awareness, overshadow assets, and dictate practices and policies toward the control and surveillance of youth (Valencia, 2010).

Figure 1: The Neoliberal Cycle of Impact on Youth Educational Spaces



Note: OST = out-of-school time.

In recent decades, the emphasis on deficits regarding both failing schools and at-risk youth has fallen victim to neoliberal interests (e.g., Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Heritage Foundation) at times fueled by strategic government-driven takeovers of public school systems (e.g., New Orleans, Detroit) managed by for-profit corporate entities (Saltman, 2015). Deficit-based ideology continues to be pervasive in the educational sphere because of sensationalized fear-based discourse and the ongoing strategies of reforming youth toward market-based solutions (e.g., testing, tutoring, and educational consulting groups; Lipman, 2013; Saltman, 2022). Meanwhile, structural factors that continue to shape educational inequities and supplant youth opportunities become replaced by a pervasive need to reform youth to facilitate perpetual increases in academic achievement (Baldrige, 2020; also see Figure 1).

Schools have historically been disproportionately underfunded where a higher percentage of racially minoritized youth reside (Lipman, 2013). Lipman (2013) notes the systematic disinvestment in public schools that has shaped inequities, highlighting that our understanding of inequities is often narrowly

understood through deficit-based ideology (e.g., achievement gap). Racially dichotomized portrayals of achievement minimize group variation through overgeneralizations, reduce achievement to test scores, and conflate learning with results scores (Mitchell & Greer, 2022).

Racially minoritized youth are disproportionately oppressed and excluded (e.g., expulsions, suspensions, arrests, and referrals to law enforcement) from educational opportunities (Nocella et al., 2017). A wide array of research has shown that stereotypes, biases, and stigma influence educator perceptions of misbehavior—leading to the disproportionate exclusion of racially minoritized youth across all disciplinary measures (Okonofua et al., 2016). Young people who experience discipline face increased grade retention, absenteeism, dropout, and academic failure (Nocella et al., 2017). Even more troubling, the links between behavioral and educational inequities have led to a sustained school-to-prison nexus—where racially minoritized youth who experience discipline are more likely to wind up in juvenile detention or criminally incarcerated (Nocella et al., 2017). Further, surveillance mechanisms in the

school reinforce frameworks of deficiency and exclusionary tactics, driven by the fear-based narratives in the media that construct youth as criminals in need of punishment, control, and surveillance (Kwon, 2013). Surveillance mechanisms, especially on the school level (i.e., police, security cameras, metal detectors), intertwine oppressive systems of capitalism and racism in ways that exacerbate inequalities and further alienate youth (Casella, 2018). Furthermore, corporate interests, including educational privatization and surveillance mechanisms, prevail in economic growth through incessant narratives of “deviant youth” and criminal mindsets shaped through a deficit-based lens (Giroux, 2022).

These commodifying and oppressive practices that young people experience highlight the need for OST spaces to provide a place of refuge from the pathologizing and alienating educational experiences. Furthermore, the trends in school systems used to understand youth development and provide reform initiatives that deeply intersect with OST spaces infiltrate both the ideology and the treatment of youth (Baldrige, 2019). These trends are emblematic of the funding structures that guide policy and practices in OST spaces.

Nonprofit Funding Paradox

A prevalent issue currently facing the OST field is funding insecurity for youth-serving organizations in the nonprofit realm (Baldrige, 2020). The current funding model centers on neoliberal beliefs that cultivate an environment that pushes for competition in the OST field versus utilizing a collaboration model (Lardier et al., 2020; Singh, 2023). Driving factors of this competitive mindset, such as “color-blind approaches” (Ford et al., 2021), set the stage for the present nonprofit funding paradox that reinforces deficit-based narratives.

The nonprofit funding paradox derives from practices of neoliberalism that inherently place systematic responsibility on individuals and organizations while deflecting from the notion that nonprofits provide services that are arguably the responsibility of our government (Sampson et al., 2019). As OST spaces find purpose in uplifting young people, this paradox illuminates the antithesis in the field’s praxis. For example, financial challenges intersect with white supremacy and neoliberalism to construct a system that unfairly penalizes spaces of color and attempts to erase

them in the guise of “market competition” in our contemporary context (Baldrige, 2020).

Various organizations and programs within the nonprofit realm historically engage in OST-centered work and receive 21st Century Community Learning Center (21CCLC) grant funding from government entities. The typical benefactors include but are not limited to the following: (a) district, county, and city-based providers (private-public); (b) national youth programs (e.g., Boys & Girls Club); (c) independent grassroots programs; (d) university-community partnership (e.g., university-based community centers); (e) faith-based programs/religious spaces; and (f) outlier programs (Baldrige et al., 2022). The discourse around these actors traditionally positions them as “saviors” in the role of fixing or rescuing racially minoritized youth (Baldrige, 2019). However, many locally organized OST spaces (particularly racially minoritized-led organizations) lack the same funding opportunities or support associated with higher-profile organizations such as the YMCA (Ford et al., 2021). The positioning of these nonprofit actors as “rescuers” of youth further solidifies the structural positioning of youth as problems needing to be fixed and supplants the alternative positioning of such actors as facilitators of space for development, innovation, healing, and leisure for youth.

The difficulties nonprofits face in acquiring funding stem from the neoliberal paradigm that pits OST actors against one another under the guise of “market-based” reform. The placement of value on individualism, meritocracy, and commodifying education influences how OST actors and funders view programming (Lardier et al., 2020; Singh, 2023). The grassroots knowledge that young people and youth workers bring into OST spaces receives continuous dismissal by the centering measurable outcome frameworks (Walker & Walker, 2012). Even frameworks that aim somewhat to embrace the knowledge and capacity of youth (e.g., the strengths-based perspective) become hindered by the need for programmers to report improvement, advancement, or other forms of fixes to youth “failures” in behavior or academic achievement so as to secure funding. Unfortunately, examples from this dichotomy are observable across the construction of youth programming in the nonprofit sector. For instance, O’Donnell and Ford (2013) found that awarded funding bids comprised only one in three 21CCLC requests and that the state government

denied \$4 billion in local grant requests over a period of 10 years. Furthermore, Mumford (2022) contends the role that race plays in funding dissemination through his findings that Black-led nonprofits within a New Orleans context were more vulnerable to funding precarity due to systematic exclusion.

HOPE, HEALING, AND OPPORTUNITIES IN OST SPACES

Even amid the challenges of market-driven practices and policies, OST spaces offer tremendous opportunities to realign equitable practices, leisure-driven balance, and inclusive activities for youth development. When not limited by the scope of market investors or the surveillance of deficit-driven funding mechanisms, OST spaces can help young people collectively heal and grow emotionally, socially, and physically. Particularly for structurally marginalized youth, OST spaces provide an opportunity to experience leisure and recreation, develop positive social relationships, engage with political power building through collaborative action, and cultivate hope. Potential activities within OST spaces such as the cocreation of programming between youth and adults; opportunities to go “off campus” on trips that engage directly with the environment and society that surround youth; youth-led innovation of digital spaces and creative solutions to systemic problems; and development of personal identity, talent, and passion through self-directed exploration set OST spaces apart and create unique development opportunities for youth as individuals and as actors in their surrounding social ecology. These opportunities are necessary for community healing, which youth need as they face the complex trauma of racism, capitalism, poverty, and living through an ongoing pandemic.

Leisure

Leisure time, which includes “free time” as well as settings, activities, and cognitive experiences that provide opportunities for self-actualization, is most effective as a tool for youth development when it exists as a blend of structured and unstructured time (Ettekal & Agans, 2020). This blended type of time—readily available in many OST spaces but absent from most in-school spaces—can be conceptualized as “serious leisure” time (as opposed to the casual leisure of activities such as sleeping or eating) and is not only a space in which youth can express themselves and build a sense of identity but

also an important opportunity for youth experiencing the complex traumas of racism and marginalization to resist and heal from these traumas alongside one another (Holston, 2016). Leisure activities play an essential part in the political and social development of racially minoritized youth (Brown et al., 2018) and provide critical time for structurally marginalized youth to engage with others of similar and diverse backgrounds, think critically, and engage civically with their communities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

Social Activism, Civic Engagement, and Transformative SEL

For youth in urban environments, social forces such as racism, unemployment, and violence impede productive development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). The COVID-19 pandemic has created new impediments to youth development and exacerbated inequities within schools and youth spaces. As explored earlier in this article, youth have been locked out of essential resources such as stable access to food while being forced to access education through distance learning, which is highly inaccessible to young people experiencing poverty, violence, and social marginalization (McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021). As youth respond to these systemic barriers, they do so through various modes of collective action (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002), and participating in such action is necessary to overcome barriers that directly harm youth. For instance, OST spaces can afford young people agency in cultivating their civic capacity toward organizing social change in their local community. These youth-serving spaces hold powerful implications in ushering social changes in communities while simultaneously influencing larger systems.

The leisure time provided via OST spaces—as it encourages and creates space for developing social activism through collective practices (Holston, 2016)—offers unique environments where youth can engage with modes of collective action. Having space to work through conflicts, foster a sense of community, and form connections with one another contribute to transformative processes for SEL as well as the development of critical consciousness of the world around them and how they can affect and shape it for youth in OST spaces (Jagers et al., 2019).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the many essential resources youth lost access to were opportunities for in-person social connection, diminishing the time they spent coregulating with peers or managing physical experiences of conflicts in community environments (Ettetal & Agans, 2020). While the nonprofit funding paradox positions high-profile national programs as the typical benefactors, it neglects open spaces for peer mediation and safe environments for practicing conflict skills that grassroots OST spaces can provide when schools fail to do so. This opportunity within OST spaces empowers young people as change agents for collective action and promotes essential outcomes related to youth healing. As Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) put it, “creating a social space where young people have the opportunity to share, listen, and learn from each other is a central strategy for engaging young people in the healing process” (p. 92).

Youth Voice, Culturally Syntonic Processes, and Storytelling

Promoting youth voice through youth-centered spaces that offer space and skills for storytelling among peers outside of school or work environments contributes to community healing across youth populations, particularly for racially minoritized youth experiencing the traumas of racism and colonialism (Bell, 2010). OST spaces that are youth-led and provide support for peer-to-peer storytelling give engaged youth experiences of serious leisure, provide transformative skills in SEL, provide tools for collective action and community healing, and encourage culturally syntonic processes. Culturally syntonic processes, defined by Chioneso et al. (2020), highlight the community healing and resistance found through a storytelling framework (C-HeARTS) as patterns of being, believing, bonding, belonging, behaving, and becoming that are evident in communication styles and healing practices among a group of people with shared identities or defining experiences. The C-HeARTS model of storytelling as community healing promotes justice-informed outcomes through three main components: (1) justice as both a condition of and an outcome of community healing; (2) culturally syntonic processes; and (3) psychological dimensions of connectedness, collective memory, and critical consciousness. Applying this model in youth OST spaces can directly challenge harmful

neoliberal paradigms by centering the voices of youth and the principles of justice and equity over conceptually damaging frameworks that punish and diminish youth autonomy. We further suggest an immediate and urgent need for such community healing practices to be emphasized in developing and implementing OST programs, supplanting those focused on the learning loss model or other forms of academic education based on neoliberal and racist achievement gap frameworks.

Social Justice Youth Development

SJYD emerged at the turn of the century as an evolution away from youth development models that viewed youth (a) as problems that needed fixing or (b) as objects of possibility for development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002). Both perspectives dehumanize youth and assign them a state of incompetence as a subject without autonomy and voice. SJYD draws on Freireian pedagogy and applied praxis within youth development frameworks to develop a model that positions young people as change agents capable of critically understanding and shaping the world around them (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). The SJYD model focuses on a balance between building critical consciousness and engaging in social action as a way for youth to access self-actualization, engagement, and relationship with the communities in which they exist, collective healing, and power building toward social change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). By prioritizing the productive development of youth spaces through the SJYD lens, we engage collective healing practices within youth communities and build alongside youth and adults in OST toward a more equitable educational environment for all.

Five principles guide SJYD: (1) analyzing power in social relationships, (2) making identity central to the work, (3) promoting systemic change, (4) encouraging collective action, and (5) embracing youth culture (Ginwright & James, 2002). As we have discussed, OST spaces are a unique and irreplaceable resource for youth in fostering identity, cultivating connections with others, exploring youth culture alongside their peers, and quintessentially developing partnerships with adults necessary for the SJYD model's success. OST spaces—when constructed outside of the confines of codified narratives of youth “failure,” driven for youth by youth, and created with the principles and practices

of SJYD as their core—are uniquely poised to, in [Ginwright and James's \(2002\)](#) words, “support youth through the process of healing from social ills by building their identities and providing skills to confront social problems” (p. 38). Never has such healing and skill building been so essential as now.

DISCUSSION

OST spaces cultivate numerous opportunities for youth support, provide critical spaces for holistic development, and share resources between young people. However, this must be done under a youth-centered umbrella that recognizes the value and affirmations that OST spaces can bring to young people as agents of social change. These valuable spaces must receive protection as extractive measures predicated on market-driven logic can censor youth-focused labor. OST spaces hold a historical precedent for providing refuge from these logics commonly observed in the mainstream education system ([Anderson, 2010](#)), thus aligning with a natural rejection of harmful practices within schooling contexts.

Assumptions about the “readiness,” “preparedness,” and overall state of worth for students based on their identities become codified into material violence and oppressions against structurally marginalized youth when the market-driven mechanisms of school systems assign them a state of structural incompetence. “Structural incompetence” is a term coined and explored by Black feminist scholar [Tressie McMillan Cottom \(2019\)](#) and is, in essence, an assumption that based on the lowest-status identity a person carries about whether that person can know themselves, can express themselves in a way that will be perceived as legible, or is deserving of being responded to as a being with agency and intellect. That is an assumption of whether they are competent. A highly bureaucratic system, such as education, maximizes capital efficiency by relying on assumptions about youth derived from cultural beliefs. When racially minoritized students become systematically classified as “failing” to meet a specific standard or benchmark determined by the educational bureaucracy, they are assigned a structural label of incompetence in pursuing or actualizing their development, health, or education—thus diminishing their voice, stripping them of their civic power, and putting them in danger in an overpoliced and punitive school

environment. This label often takes shape through language, such as “at risk” or “in need,” and prescribes to whole identity groups of students a state of incompetence that no level of personal action, behavior, or development can dispel. Youth-serving OST spaces can reject deficit portrayals by incorporating young people into the organization’s decision-making processes and providing leadership opportunities. Furthermore, the youth workers within these spaces can intentionally foster authentic relationships with youth by listening to what young people deem as necessary within the organization, community, and personal lives.

The centering of youth within OST spaces begins to craft a foundation that emboldens hope and opportunity and affirms the wholeness and competence of youth. The OST field’s contemporary sociopolitical context requires a reimagining during this age of COVID-19, racial strife, and political precarity. Our current landscape presents the opportunity to place young people’s input into conceptualizing and constructing equity-centered praxis in the OST sphere. Youth’s frontline experiences navigating programming equip these individuals with experiential knowledge of what young people deem as valuable and rebuff market-driven ideals. Additionally, the creativity displayed by young people during the pandemic (e.g., organizing mass movements for liberation and justice) illuminates the nuance in which youth grew in a COVID-19 context while simultaneously rejecting notions of “learning loss” ([Mitchell & Greer, 2022](#)). Uplifting young people’s knowledge (particularly those from historically marginalized communities) helps mediate the white supremacist neoliberal norms in the OST field.

CALL TO ACTION

We call on policymakers, school boards, administrators, nonprofit leaders, researchers, youth social workers, OST program funders, and national social work organizations, such as the National Association of Social Workers and Council on Social Work Education, to take the radical step of rejecting paradigms that treat youth as a problem to be fixed or as helpless, incompetent subjects in need of saving ([Baldrige, 2019](#)). Each actor can play a significant role in rejecting these harmful paradigms at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. This reimagining demands a shift away from how we conceptualize social work praxis for OST spaces within

curricula, rethinking how evaluation transpires in the field and redefining what holds significance in funding decisions for OST spaces. Focus on opportunities for storytelling, transformative conflict practices, cooperating on collective action, engaging critically with social activism, forming relationships with peers and adults, and experiencing leisure must supplant the focus on surveilling, evaluating, and reporting on young people's status in relationship to arbitrary and harmful notions of academic standards. We intentionally avoid making specific programming or curriculum recommendations because we believe that partnerships between youth and adults should directly engage youth in planning and creating OST spaces and the activities that happen within them. While provided frameworks and strategies such as SJYD may provide some basis for the development of OST spaces that reject harmful deficit narratives, we encourage adults to engage youth in said development. Processes that engage the input from youth and adults through systems thinking, model building, and creative problem solving can prevent programs from falling into the pitfalls of market-driven extractive programming and can help reengage community action in environments where adults and youth are experiencing burnout from repeated attempts to "intervene" or "fix" by outside actors (Ballard et al., 2020). Such action places the power to set an agenda, design programming, create benchmarks, and evaluate success back into the hands of youth and the adults they share space with instead of allowing it to become co-opted by neoliberal commodification. Furthermore, we affirm that youth-serving organizations can engage models and principles recommended here through a vast diversity of OST spaces with different environments, communities, and goals—from basketball practices to dance clubs to video game communities to group therapy meetings.

In a time when white supremacy drives the ending of Black lives while purchasing groceries in Buffalo, New York, and the massacre of Latinx children at a school in Uvalde, Texas, business as usual in schools and OST spaces cannot continue. As wealth inequality explodes, the COVID-19 pandemic persists, and the climate crises escalate, we need more inclusive narratives that uplift youth and cherish their well-being. We must replace deficit-based narratives in school systems and realign schooltime spaces away from extractive protocols. Youth need

their time back. In a time of crisis, all youth need inclusive forms of pedagogy that develop their well-being. To do this, we must consider moving away from rigid academic-driven and extractive programming in OST spaces. Every young person deserves quality OST opportunities in our society. As a collective, we must strive for this reality. **CS**

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