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Multimedia Storytelling: An Approach for Processing Collective Trauma and Healing with Marginalized Youth

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines multimedia counter-storytelling as a tool for placed-at-risk youth to process trauma and heal. Research occurred during the 2023 summer institute of a youth development program in a Westside Chicago neighborhood. I interviewed 10 youth and three youth mentors. A narrative, metaphorical analysis was used to connect the interview data and the digital content the youth produced during the programming. Using a Healing-Centered Engagement (HCE) via multimedia counter-storytelling framework, this study contributes to a small but growing field of research investigating non-traditional forms of healing, specifically focusing on placed-at-risk youth involved in community violence. Findings detail practices that could benefit violence prevention programs and practitioners working with marginalized youth, including establishing relational trust and collaboration among mentors and youth participants, developing participants' agency, and strengthening participants' self-assurance and meaning-making of their lived experience.

Keywords: healing-centered engagement, collective trauma, multimedia storytelling, counter-narrative

The public health approach to violence reduction targets the root causes of the problem (e.g., poverty, lack of employment opportunities and social services, underfunded schools, and a scarcity of youth programming) instead of the symptoms (e.g., gang involvement, violent crime, substance use, and incarcerations). It acknowledges that placed-at-risk youth who experience community violence are affected by the long-term impacts of chronic traumatic stress. Effects of chronic

traumatic stress may include an inability to view the world as a safe place and handle common stress, struggling to relate to or empathize with others, difficulty regulating or describing emotions, impaired attachment, lack of self-assurance, self-destructive behavior, aggression, sleep disturbances, shame, and guilt (Sinha & Rosenberg, 2013).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, epidemiologists helped call attention to the fact that Black and Latine communities across the country were also among those hit hardest by the virus in the number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths (CDC, 2022). In these communities, there were more multigenerational households, essential workers, individuals who relied on public transportation, and people who lacked access to healthcare. Such conditions put people at heightened risk, and the consequences greatly impacted families' economic stability, food security, mental health, and overall well-being. At the same time, many urban cities also experienced an uptick in gun violence and other violent crimes (Ssentongo & Fronterre, 2021).

As Chicago grappled with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it simultaneously witnessed a 55% increase in homicides compared to 2019 data (City of Chicago, 2023). A review of violent crime data showed that violence levels remained elevated in 2021 and 2022, with a 61% and 40% increase in homicides, respectively, compared to pre-pandemic levels (City of Chicago, 2023). There was also a 45% increase in youth homicides in Chicago for youth under 18 (City of Chicago, 2023). Most violent crime in Chicago continued to be concentrated in just 10 of the city's 77 communities (Courtney et al., 2022). Surveys of youth have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on youth mental health, including higher levels of depression and anxiety, impaired decision-making, learning challenges, decreased connections to peers and adults, trouble coping with stress, violence perpetration and victimization, substance use, and suicide (Bell et al., 2023).

In addition to the negative impacts of the pandemic, youth in Chicago are faced with the consequences of exposure to violence in their communities. Youth who live in neighborhoods with heightened levels of violence are more likely to have diminished academic achievement, difficulty forming trusting relationships, depression, anxiety, and aggression (Lynn-Whaley & Sugarman, 2017). The impact of COVID-19, combined with increased exposure to violence, may have damaging effects on youth, including their likelihood of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. Exposure to violence and emotional distress are furthermore associated with an increased risk of youth violence perpetration and victimization (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). Just as marginalized communities had a greater risk of being affected by COVID-19 due to shared risk factors, no one factor leads to youth violence; rather, a multitude of individual, familial/relational, peer/social, and community-based factors impact youths' risk of violence involvement, whether as victim and/or perpetrator (CDC, 2020).

As a response to the hardships magnified by the pandemic, the City of Chicago invested resources to reduce risk factors, increase protective factors, and engage marginalized youth with a more comprehensive approach to deterring violent crime. In 2021, Illinois Governor Pritzker declared gun violence a public health crisis and allocated 250 million dollars to youth development, violence prevention, trauma

recovery, and programs diverting youth from the criminal justice system (Illinois State Government, 2021). This public health approach to violence reduction targeted the root causes of the problem instead of the symptoms. It acknowledged that marginalized youth who experience community violence are affected by the long-term impacts of chronic traumatic stress.

In the wake of the George Floyd protests in the summer of 2020 and calls to defund the police, investing in intervention workers who de-escalate potentially violent situations, build relationships with youth, provide mentorship, and engage youth in holistic approaches to dealing with chronic traumatic stress and opportunities to heal, had become popular alternatives for progressive leaders hoping to create long-lasting, sustainable change, beyond their term(s) in office (The White House, 2022).

As an alternative high school principal during the pandemic in a marginalized Westside Chicago community, I collaborated closely with a violence prevention worker from the community, who provided not only traditional case management (e.g., mentoring, goal setting, social services) but also youth development via multimedia production programming in a nonprofit he started called QuestLuv. I was marked with questions about the unconventional ways placed-at-youth could process trauma and heal, as well as the impact trusted adults and prosocial activities could have on youth's well-being. The purpose of this case study was to connect the dots between processing collective trauma and healing with placed-at-risk youth and using multimedia production as a form of engagement in violence prevention programs. Specifically, this study addressed the questions: How do QuestLuv mentors establish relational trust and collaboration with placed-at-risk youth? How does multimedia counter-storytelling affect youth's processing of trauma and healing?

It is my hope that this study will contribute to the small but growing field of research focusing on multimedia counter-storytelling as a tool for processing trauma and healing. While there is no silver bullet approach to violence prevention efforts among adolescents and young adults, I hope my research will provide violence prevention workers, mental health care professionals, teachers, and mentors of placed-at-risk youth in marginalized communities a framework for empowering youth to collectively process trauma, heal, and reshape their narratives and futures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, Ginwright's (2015, 2018) healing-centered framework is introduced and defined, the historical and pedagogical implications of counter-storytelling are surveyed, and current research on multimedia production as a tool for healing is referenced.

Framework

Healing-Centered Engagement (HCE) is a relatively new framework (Ginwright, 2015, 2018) that addresses trauma through an assets-based, collective approach of building participant agency, self-assurance, and meaning-making. Instead of focusing on coping strategies to manage symptoms of trauma, it promotes healing by tackling

the root causes and systemic conditions of trauma. There is a dearth of examples of HCE models in action, with the model being so new; however, there is available research on alternative approaches to processing trauma outside of psychotherapies and pharmacotherapies.

Counter-storytelling has a rich and continuing tradition in African American, Latin American, and Native American communities. Enslaved Africans told—in song, letters, and verse—stories about their own pain and oppression; Mexicans composed *corridos* and *testimonios*, passing down stories from generation to generation about gringo injustice; Native Americans told folk tales, myths, and oral histories about shared themes of land removal and subjugation, in addition to environmental exploitation (Delgado, 1989). Delgado (1989) contended that oppressed groups have known instinctively that counter-stories are an essential tool for their survival and liberation; stories have the power to heal individuals from internalized oppression and promote solidarity among the marginalized. Du Bois (1903) wrote of a "double consciousness" or an internal struggle where one's identity constantly conflicts with the oppressor's gaze. Counter-storytelling, however, "emboldens the hearer, who may have had the same thoughts and experiences the storyteller describes but hesitated to give them voice. Having heard another express them, he or she realizes, I am not alone" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437). Counter-storytelling, thus, empowers people to build solidarity through their shared experiences of oppression; it challenges the standardization and complacency of White norms and values, dismantles "otherness," humanizes us, and emphasizes our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us closer together (Delgado, 1989), (Dixson & Anderson, 2018).

Counter-storytelling can serve at least four functions when working with placed-at-risk youth:

1. It can build community among marginalized youth by putting a human and familiar face to collective trauma through narration and character development.
2. It can challenge the perceived wisdom of those with power and privilege by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems.
3. It can open new windows into the lives of marginalized youth by showing the possibilities beyond their life situation and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position.
4. It can teach youth that by combining elements from both story and the current reality, one can construct another world richer than the story or their reality alone. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002)

Thus, counter-storytelling aligns with Ginwright's (2015, 2018) conception of HCE by providing opportunities for placed-at-risk youth facing collective trauma to connect with each other, reflect on their reality, and reshape their narratives and futures.

Studies involving multimedia storytelling as a tool for processing collective trauma and healing (Haene et al. 2010; Lenette et al., 2018; Parr, 2007), while not naming HCE specifically, shared commonalities in their design, including the importance of establishing relational trust and collaboration, developing participant

agency, and building participant self-assurance and meaning-making. While these studies focused mainly on using multimedia storytelling with refugees, there is a greater opportunity to extend this research to other marginalized groups.

With focused attention in Chicago (and many cities across the US) on youth involvement in community violence and considering most youth's general attraction to multimedia consumption and production, there was a natural connection to explore how using multimedia counter-storytelling could be a tool for healing from trauma under the HCE framework. While there is limited literature available on the philosophy of HCE and why it is important (CPS, 2023; Ginwright, 2015, 2018; Maleku et al., 2022), this study attempts to provide a detailed, in-depth analysis of a program for placed-at-risk youth that was already in action and using multimedia counter-storytelling as a tool for processing trauma and healing within the HCE framework.

METHODS

This study focused on QuestLuv, a small 501(c)3 nonprofit located in a Westside Chicago neighborhood that received a 3-year grant from Pritzker's violence prevention youth development funding. Founder and CEO of QuestLuv, Angel Santos, born and raised on the streets of the lower west side of Chicago, was drawn into street life at a young age. After multiple arrests, losing too many loved ones, and spending 10 years in federal prison, Angel's journey was just beginning. Released in 2016, Angel came out into a changed world; the people in his life had moved on, places were different, and technology had advanced. As he got to know his 11-year-old son and his son's friends, Angel quickly realized that smartphones were a tool for connecting with youth. With just the camera on his iPhone and some determination, Angel started QuestLuv. What first began as an opportunity to build a relationship with his son and keep him out of trouble turned into a mission to create digital content that rivals professional production companies while reclaiming the narratives of his city. QuestLuv's mission is to empower youth to reshape their narratives and become the authors of their future through multimedia production, mentorship, storytelling, and healing-centered engagement. With the additional resources the violence prevention grant provided, QuestLuv expanded its impact, enrolling 40 youth in their 6-week, 2023 summer institute.

Creswell & Poth's (2018) definition of case study as a methodology—a type of design that may be an object of study as well as a product of the inquiry—was used in this research design. Case study research is defined as an approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material), and reports a case description and case themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Through an in-depth analysis of QuestLuv's operations during its 6-week summer institute, I examined multiple sources of information (e.g., interviews and audiovisual materials) to explore how mentors established relational trust and collaboration with placed-at-risk youth and how multimedia counter-storytelling affected youth within the HCE framework. Since there is an absence of literature on

HCE models in action and a scarcity of research on multimedia storytelling as a tool for processing trauma and healing with placed-at-risk youth, this case study was selected as a unique opportunity to highlight the work of an organization already using multimedia production as a tool for healing by hearing directly from the youth participants of the program, their mentors, and the digital content they created.

The interviews with the founder and CEO, Angel, three mentors, and 10 youth participants of QuestLuv summer institute programming were the primary data sources of this study, as described in Table 1.

Table 1: QuestLuv Interviews

Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Role
Angel	45	Mexican-American	Founder and CEO
Pablo	47	Puerto Rican-American	Mentor
Harris	34	Black	Mentor
Eric	22	Black and Puerto Rican	Mentor
Arnold	24	Mexican-American	Youth Participant
Alan	21	Mexican-American	Youth Participant
David	18	Mexican-American	Youth Participant
Ivan	18	Mexican-American	Youth Participant
Quincy	19	Black	Youth Participant
Marquis	18	Black	Youth Participant
Jeremiah	18	Black	Youth Participant
Lil'A	18	Mexican-American	Youth Participant
James	18	Black and Puerto Rican	Youth Participant
Junior	21	Mexican-American	Youth Participant

I conducted two rounds of open coding followed by first-cycle inductive thematic coding. Then, I deductively coded the data using metaphor analysis and the healing-centered framework: establishing relational trust and collaboration, agency in content and process, and self-assurance and meaning-making. To gain a more secure understanding of the issues I investigated, I also reviewed and coded digital content

on QuestLuv's YouTube page and public comments on the content, broadening the scope of evidence beyond this case study to highlight the multimedia projects created by youth within the organization.

My data analysis approach integrated connecting strategies with the digital content; as defined by Maxwell (2013), connecting strategies attempt to holistically understand the data in context using various methods to identify the relationships among different elements in the texts/mediums, rather than fragmenting, sorting, and categorizing as is done in coding alone. Along with open coding of the digital content and public comments, and fitting to the study's exploration of storytelling, I chose narrative, metaphorical analysis as a connecting strategy.

Metaphor analysis stems from the seminal work of Lakoff & Johnson (1980), in which they posit that metaphors are an expression of the structure of thought; metaphor is regarded as a way of thinking about or conceptualizing the world and can also influence our actions. The work of Lakoff & Johnson (1980) stimulated a certain interest in studying metaphors in both cognitive and clinical psychology, examining how using metaphor in narrating personal experiences and beliefs can uncover meaning (Moser, 2000). Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argued that a large part of self-understanding is the "search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives. The process of self-understanding is the continual development of new life stories for yourself" (p. 232-233).

FINDINGS

Ginwright's (2015, 2018) HCE framework is newly being used to rethink the way institutions respond to those affected by trauma. Chicago Public Schools have adapted the framework, and HCE is often cited in violence prevention grants funded by the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois (CPS, 2019). There are few examples of models in action, so I hoped to apply this HCE framework to QuestLuv programming to understand better how HCE can help placed-at-risk youth heal from collective trauma. There was a natural marriage between HCE and multimedia counter-storytelling because HCE advances a collective view of trauma across interdependent and collective communities and/or cultures. It establishes a praxis of awareness, reflection, and action to address root causes and systemic trauma conditions, building collective efficacy in its participants. Similarly, counter-storytelling has been found to promote solidarity among the marginalized and promote healing from historical, generational, and collective trauma (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Research on narrative theory affirms that re-storying through a strengths-based framework like HCE can actually help survivors restore feelings of hope and agency by giving voice to their experiences with trauma while promoting healing and resilience (Diebold et al., 2021). Empowerment and self-efficacy emerge through re-storying, and scholars posit that storytelling can help trauma survivors enlist the positive aspects of self in the recovery process, even in contexts outside of clinical medical services (Diebold et al., 2021). Using multimedia counter-storytelling to process trauma and healing builds collaboration, agency, self-assurance, and

meaning-making for participants and their audience (Diebold et al., 2021; Haene et al., 2010; Lenette et al., 2018).

An essential element of the HCE Framework was establishing relational trust and collaboration. In answering my research question of how mentors establish relational trust and partnership with placed-at-risk youth, I found that the mentors of QuestLuv (a) maintained a student-teacher, teacher-student mindset in which youth's experiences, backgrounds, knowledge, and dreams were honored and valued, (b) were relentlessly consistent and dependable in their words and actions, (c) held the youth accountable as a form of care, (d) invested their time and resources to guide and support the youth in their pursuits and goals, (e) shared their stories and leveraged past experiences to find common ground, challenge, and influence the youth's future vision of themselves.

For my second research question as to how multimedia counter-storytelling affects youth, I found that through their involvement in counter-storytelling and creating original content, youth developed or affirmed a critical lens in viewing mainstream content, gained agency and a sense of possibility to dream big, and felt more connected to their community.

Relationships Matter Most

My research found that building relational trust and collaboration with the youth was essential for healing-centered engagement. Mentors and youth shared certain mindsets and traits that made mentors effective at establishing trust with the youth. These mindsets and traits include:

- **power-sharing:** honoring youth voice and interests; modeling humility
- **mutual learning:** learning from and with the youth as student-teacher, teacher-student
- **relentless engagement:** showing up for the youth at all times, no matter what
- **accountability as care:** once trust and respect have been established, being comfortable with challenging the other's thinking and/or questioning actions that are harmful to self or others
- **leveraging shared lived experiences:** being honest about past mistakes instead of glorifying them; not imposing personal beliefs or values, but offering up own stories with transferable lessons learned

Youth Want to Feel Part of Something Special

Wanting to feel like you belong is a normal human emotion that is especially heightened in adolescence. Often, teenagers find outlets in school, sports, and clubs, but when these are not desirable or available to youth, being on the streets is a highly competitive option.

Participants expressed that QuestLuv was unique to other programming they had previously been a part of because:

1. QuestLuv felt like a family
2. Programming was dynamic and responsive to youths' interests
3. They felt like they were part of something bigger than themselves
4. The program was inclusive to youth from across the city

The qualities of establishing relational trust with mentors are closely related to the first two points about programming; QuestLuv feeling like a family could be attributed to the relentless engagement, accountability as care, and leveraging of shared experiences by the mentors; the dynamic programming was a result of power-sharing and mutual learning among the mentors and youth. Thus, there was alignment between the programming values and the mentors who were carrying out the work. The youth were very clear in their interviews that it was obvious to them when a teacher or program leader was just there to collect a paycheck versus having an invested interest in them as a person. To make the most impact, the programming and the people leading the programming must have an aligned vision and shared values.

The third point, youth feeling like they were part of something bigger than themselves, involved being seen for their individual contributions as well as the collective impact they were making. Some youth might experience this feeling on a sports team; a point guard, for example, is not going to be the top scorer for the team, but everyone knows their value for advancing the basketball up the court and setting up the team's offense. Youth that are not athletically prone—or that do not have the opportunity to join a team sport, or have to work after school, or have dropped out of school, or are not allowed to participate on a team due to low grades or behavior issues—need other outlets to feel like they belong. Many youth involved in QuestLuv programming were into sports, but when faced with violence, poverty, and other forms of trauma, they needed something more to gain agency in their healing. For youth who had dealt their whole lives with carefully navigating borders, being a part of a program that welcomed youth from around the city gave them the opportunity to defy stereotypes, confront bias, and build collective efficacy from each other's differences and shared experiences.

When Given a Space to Share Their Voices, Youth Gain Agency

A recurring metaphor in the interviews and digital content was "love from the trenches;" despite living in conditions at times akin to a war zone, youth and mentors were on the ground witnessing a lot of love pouring through some of the most challenging situations. Not only did they bear witness, but they also expressed an active role in spreading the love, thus being healed and taking on the healer role. By attending QuestLuv programming and having the opportunity to create multimedia content, youth evaluated what they did not like about traditional media, constructed their own stories, and allowed audiences to bear witness to their work. Youth involved in the QuestLuv program gained agency through their involvement in counter-storytelling and creating original content that received a positive response from the online community and in-person viewings. Through the collaborative work of creating content with people across ages, genders, races, ethnicities, affiliations, and

neighborhoods, they also developed collective efficacy, imagining a different future for themselves and their communities.

Self-Assurance and Meaning-Making

Informally Processing Trauma and Healing

QuestLuv programming empowered participants by engaging them in multimedia production, providing an outlet for youth to make meaning of their experiences, share their stories with a real audience, and gain self-assurance and self-efficacy. All of the youth identified informal ways that they processed trauma. While all acknowledged living with some degree of trauma, not one participant mentioned seeking or wanting to seek support from a mental health professional. They collectively had experienced abandonment from parents, homelessness, domestic violence, incarceration, shootings, racial profiling, food insecurity, lost loved ones, heartbreak, and more, but they did not dwell on the adversity; instead, they focused on the methods they have found to help them heal.

Lil' A, who had gone through bouts of depression, shared:

> Yeah, I've been through some trauma. I feel like everybody has been through a little bit of trauma, even if they don't know what it really means. But, you know, whether it's my dad being away in prison for ten years or me getting pulled up on a couple of times by gangs, there's just been so many things, and I struggled for a while on how to cope with that. But lately I've been finding it to help to talk to my mom. And, you know, sometimes you just gotta let it all out. Just tell her whatever's on your mind. Oh. And ask for advice if you need it. And just share your feelings. Don't keep it to yourself. Because the more you hold it in, the more it's going to turn into anger more than anything.

Arnold similarly shared that he tries not to hold things in and added that creating content on social media can be a means of release. He said:

> I think creating content for social media is relieving. You mic yourself up, stream, and talk to your supporters, so that can be a relief. It helps you a lot because even though no one is there to talk back to you, it feels like someone is there listening to conversate with you.

David took a different approach. When he was "going through a bad thing," he would take a couple of days to himself, not talk to anyone, and then David would write rap lyrics and feel better, seeing how he felt come out in words on a page. Eric also spoke of making music as a means of processing pain, in addition to boxing. Other youth also mentioned physical activity such as running, playing basketball, and going to the gym as an outlet to deal with hard times.

Junior, who was currently in a wheelchair due to a car accident and several reconstructive surgeries on his hip, expressed a sentiment shared by many of the youth that he had to be strong for others. He shared:

> I was going through some rough stuff recently and said, 'Why am I going through this? Why is this happening to me?' I would see my mom and she'd be sad, and I'm like, I just have to deal with it because I don't want her to see me sad. So that's why I had to deal with that s#!t. I took it and just ran with it.

The youth also spoke about talking with their mentors, Angel and Pablo, about their problems and valuing their advice since their mentors had been through similar situations. Pablo shared that hearing the youth's stories was healing for him as well. Pablo explained:

> If the youth are able to share something intimate in a space, there's healing taking place because usually, a person doesn't want to talk about something that they don't want to make better. And when you get that opportunity to hear a youngster share something intimate with you, it's like for me, it's one of those things, yeah, it is healing for me as well. But it's like now I got them where I need them to be right now. And when they get to that place, where they are able to share something intimate in a space with you—you got to capitalize on that opportunity so he can see that there's healing behind what he's doing, and not only for him, but for me too.

Self-Assurance and Imagining a Different Future

An important part of the healing process was for youth to develop self-assurance and imagine a different future for themselves. A year ago, Junior said that if you were to ask him where he saw himself in 5 years, he would have said he would be lucky not to be in prison or in the ground. Something as simple as seeing himself in the short films produced by QuestLuv had an impact on him. Junior said, "I was used to seeing myself on camera before doing stupid s#!t. Like, one time they had me on camera breaking someone's windows. It's cool now though to see what else I could do with what they have me on camera for in the films."

Now, when asked where Junior sees himself in 5 years, he says:

> Things I've gone through, it opened up my eyes to see like, I mean, don't get me wrong, I'll always be where I'm from, but there's bigger things to do out here. We were kids growing up so we didn't know no better, but you know, you gotta be financially stable, you gotta worry about your credit, you gotta worry about where you're gonna lay your head, what you're gonna eat. I want to have my own business. I want to open up an HVAC business with my pops. And move. Get out of the hood. Have a big ass crib and all that.

When asked where they see themselves in 5 years, many of the youth and mentors spoke of their futures inextricably linked with QuestLuv. Eric said, "I see myself impacting a lot of kids. I still need to learn more about the cameras and everything, but I feel like this is gonna be in my life for a long time." Harris shared:

> I see QuestLuv with a lease. Maybe three locations like warehouses with film and set ups and pop set ups and stuff like that. I see us as a film production team, you know, doing commercials. I want people to look at our work and be like, 'We want to hire y'all, so shoot this commercial for us. We want to hire you to shoot this film. We got this budget. We can do that. That's what I see. New studios in the next five years. Hopefully, the next three years.

Lil' A, who went off to college at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the fall of 2023, said he was an undeclared major, but he knew he wanted to study business or something that would be able to help QuestLuv develop.

James said in 5 years, he sees himself "Just grinding, keep grinding. And that's what I love about QuestLuv. You can just be you. You don't gotta put a front on. You can just be you. That's why I feel like this is home because you can just be you."

When Angel started out with no more than an iPhone, he initially did not seemingly have a lot to offer the youth. But he believed in them, and he believed in himself. He took their stories seriously, invested in professional equipment, made connections to develop their skills, and garnered support from the local community to fund their work as a 501(c)3 nonprofit. Seeing all that Angel accomplished and being a part of it significantly impacted the youth and what they believed was possible for their dreams.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Organizations working with youth in marginalized communities should evaluate human resources policies pertaining to recruitment, hiring, and communications to ensure they align with the best interests of the most placed-at-risk youth. Broadening conceptions of healing to include informal processes outside of psychotherapies and pharmacotherapies; expanding the trauma-informed care model to include healing-centered engagement; using multimedia production as a tool for counter-storytelling and youth empowerment; and further research, programmatic reviews and inter-agency collaboration are also recommended in response to the study's findings.

Reconsider Human Resources Approaches in Institutions Serving Placed-at-Risk Youth

Recruitment and Hiring

Policymakers, administrators, organization leaders—those making programming decisions—and those working directly with youth should be rooted in the community, share similar life experiences to the youth, or be culturally competent. These factors

must be considered in recruitment and hiring at all levels. Leveraging shared experiences was a key factor for building relational trust among the mentors and youth; however, many school districts and youth-serving organizations have policies that prevent individuals with criminal records from working with youth. Organizations should adopt processes for considering potential candidates with criminal records and evaluate them based on their present qualifications, not their past time served.

Communication

Laws, codes, policies, and practices meant to protect youth can inadvertently create additional barriers between youth and the support they so desperately need. In addition to hiring practices, most public school districts require staff/student communication during school hours, on approved school devices, and with school email addresses. Phone calls, texts, social media exchanges are not allowed. While these measures are understandably designed to protect youth from predatory behaviors, they are also extremely limiting for people working with youth who need to develop trust by showing them they care and being available in any way and at all times. When youth are on the block and need an Uber ride to escape a dangerous situation, are grieving a loved one, or need the contact information of a parent of a friend who has just been arrested or hospitalized, they are not going to do that from their school laptop via email. They're just not.

Rethink Healing

Much of what we think we know about healing is influenced by potentially biased studies published in medical journals. Driessen et al. (2015), for example, found that the efficacy of psychological interventions for depression has been overestimated in the published literature, just as it has been for pharmacotherapy. The researchers recommend that funding agencies and journals should archive both original protocols and raw data from treatment trials to allow the detection and correction of outcome reporting bias (Driessen et al. 2015). In perhaps the most comprehensive review to date, Leichsenring et al. (2022) surveyed studies comprising over 650,000 patients suffering from a broad range of mental illnesses and found that while psychotherapies and pharmacotherapies are recommended as first-line treatments, their efficacy may be overestimated, due to a variety of shortcomings in clinical trials (e.g., publication bias, weak control conditions such as waiting list). A realistic estimate of the efficacy of psychotherapies and pharmacotherapies is critical to better inform practices, policies, and funding centered around healing.

Increase Training on Healing-Centered Engagement

For those of us who work with placed-at-risk youth, there is much we can do to create opportunities for healing outside of psychotherapies and pharmacotherapies. Just as there has been a push for training of teachers, aid workers, mental health care professionals, etc. on Trauma-Informed Care, which emphasizes coping and symptom management, there should be investment in funding and resources for

training on Healing-Centered Engagement, which takes an assets-based approach to empower youth to address the root causes and systemic conditions of the trauma, building agency and, when done in community, collective efficacy. Respecting the agency and voice of individuals who survive systems of violence is essential to overcome policies that reflect colonial thinking (which disempowers and ignores those who are being controlled). HCE provides a path for not only promoting self-healing and recovery but also challenging the institutional structures and systems that ignore the informal ways of self-treatment that are already unfolding as youth try to survive conditions they must cope with on their own.

Increase Training on Healing-Centered Engagement

In recent years, there has been a maelstrom of headlines on the adverse effects of social media on youth mental health. Hundreds of school districts across the US have gone so far as to sue the social media platforms Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube (Randazzo & Tracy, 2023). According to Keller Rohrback L.L.P. (2023), the firm representing school districts in this litigation, research confirms that excessive use of social media is associated with increased rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, eating disorders, and suicide in youth. As alleged in the complaints filed in the lawsuit, these companies have "made choices to target youth, to maximize the time youth spend on social media platforms and then designed their algorithms to feed children harmful content, like videos promoting eating disorders, violence, self-harm, and suicide" (Keller Rohrback L.L.P., 2023).

While we are waiting to see if there will be any accountability and regulations for social media companies, Gupta et al. (2022) argue that open, nonjudgmental, and developmentally appropriate strategies (such as education and practical problem-solving) can mitigate the potential risks associated with social media and smartphone use in youth. Most adolescents now cannot imagine their lives without social media, so it is up to parents, schools, youth mentors, and mental health care professionals to work with youth to use social media in positive ways. Gupta et al. (2022) point out that there is still a paucity of empirical research on how teenagers understand social media and how they can use the larger modern media discourses to voice an opinion, strengthen their agency, and even access a variety of friendships and services that may boost their well-being. This is consistent with the testimonies of the youth interviewed in this study, who frequently cited sharing their content on social media as a positive experience that helped them feel connected to others. As more research is conducted on how youth use social media to make their voices heard, multimedia counter-storytelling is a tool that should be explored further as a particularly effective tool for engaging and empowering youth, especially marginalized youth that seek out content on social media, to see representations of themselves that are often skewed or completely absent in mainstream media.

Explore Further Research

Throughout the US, policymakers, advocates, community leaders, institutions, and individuals are desperately looking for ways to curb violence in their neighborhoods. There is no one cause, but rather, a combination of individual,

familial, peer/social, and community risk factors that contribute to youth involvement in violent crime. HCE is a relatively new concept, but the framework is worth exploring further, as it could be adopted by institutions that serve youth to promote healing and build youth agency and collective efficacy. More case studies, such as this one, could be replicated with other organizations that adopt HCE practices to glean insights from program leaders, mentors, youth, and community members to further define the essential components of this HCE framework.

Larger programmatic reviews could also be conducted of organizations who have adopted this framework; for example, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) launched a HCE model as part of their 5-year plan in 2019, and a variety of data could be collected and analyzed to assess successes and challenges during this time to inform further pedagogy and practice. The University of Chicago Crime Lab could partner with CPS schools in areas more affected by violence in the city, as well as city agencies like the Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) and state agencies like the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA). Through these collaborations, the Crime Lab could support CPS and agencies funded through DFSS and ICIJA healing-centered, violence prevention grants to assess the programs' impact on violence reduction. The findings from this work could lead to new policies and funding allocations favoring a healing-centered approach to community violence.

CONCLUSION

After years of working in marginalized communities, I have often found myself at odds with institutions and individuals whose assumptions and attitudes echo colonial powers, and their perceptions of those they are trying to control as "the other" stand in the way of doing right by the youth. While my work with youth in the past had centered around education and advocacy, witnessing the work of QuestLuv left me wanting to explore how multimedia counter-storytelling could be a tool for processing trauma and healing.

I have seen youth deal with horrible things– deportation, abuse, neglect, violence, homelessness, hunger, and depression. But I have also seen youth heal in remarkable ways, informally processing trauma outside of mental health systems by finding strength in their families, friends, mentors, in their ambitions and dreams. The tools I have seen individuals develop to self-therapize revealed to me the incredible human capacity to tap into internal resources as they improvise techniques for resilience and survival. There is further opportunity to continue to explore and understand the tools we have at our disposal to facilitate healing for youth, including multimedia counter-storytelling.

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