Original Research

Cultural Responsiveness in Sport-Based Youth Development

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Government and non-government agencies increasingly use sport to engage communities and promote non-sport development goals (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Welty Peachey et al., 2019). This approach, known as sport-for-development (SFD), aims to foster sustainable social development, particularly in marginalized communities (Kidd, 2008). SFD initiatives operate across diverse social and geopolitical contexts (Spaaij et al., 2018; Whitley et al., 2019a, 2019b). A subset of SFD is sport-based youth development (SBYD), which leverages sport to teach life skills to youth (Perkins & Noam, 2007). SBYD is often implemented in out-of-school time (OST) programs, reaching youth from varied backgrounds in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Consequently, participants experience and interpret development through sport in unique ways (Bruening et al., 2015; Whitley et al., 2016). However, scholars caution against assuming sport inherently fosters positive outcomes (Camiré & Santos, 2019; Coakley, 2011; Sugden, 2010). The benefits of sport depend heavily on social context, particularly the roles of coaches, parents, and peers (Bruner et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2017; Rauscher & Cooky, 2016; Son & Berdychevsky, 2022).

A key concern in SFD and SBYD is the imposition of hegemonic influences by program leaders from privileged backgrounds who may disregard the sociocultural realities of marginalized communities (Svensson & Wood, 2017). These influences often reflect organizational ideologies that ignore ethnic traditions and reinforce cultural conformity, potentially acting as sites of colonialist control (Anderson, 2006; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Youth may feel pressured to assimilate into dominant cultural norms, sacrificing ethnic community values. In such cases, SBYD programs risk perpetuating neocolonialism by normalizing subordination and prescribing acceptable behaviors and aspirations (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). These issues are worsened in programs that are underfunded, disorganized, and contextually misaligned (Coalter, 2010; Kidd, 2008). To counteract this, scholars and practitioners must adopt antiracist praxis and leverage sport to challenge colonialist structures (McGarry et al., 2023; Sheppard et al., 2023; Whitley et al., 2023).

SBYD programs should align rules and expectations with culturally relevant values and recognize youth culture as an asset rather than focusing on deficits (Perkins & Noam, 2007; Petitpas et al., 2005). Research has identified program elements that foster positive youth outcomes, including Sanders' (2016) seven SFD factors, which emphasize the importance of materials and cultural contexts that shape participation. However, gaps remain in understanding how OST programs are intentionally designed to reflect the cultural needs of diverse youth. There is also a need for practical guidance to help SBYD leaders implement culturally responsive and responsible programming (Leverson et al., 2021). This manuscript addresses that gap by integrating cultural responsiveness into SBYD practices.

Benson's (1997, 2006) and Benson et al.'s (2007) developmental assets framework, grounded in positive youth development, defines cultural responsiveness as a youth's comfort with and understanding of diverse backgrounds, positioning it as an internal asset. However, we conceptualize cultural responsiveness as an external asset, an institution's or individual's ability to value and adapt to diversity (Cross et al., 1989). This ecological view is widely applied across various fields, including college athletics (Cooper et al., 2017, 2020), inclusive education (Page et al., 2020), OST programs (Kennedy et al., 2007), counseling (Sue, 2001), and youth violence prevention (Hudley & Taylor, 2006). Given its proven value across sectors, cultural responsiveness holds promise for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of SBYD programs (Lachance et al., 2023). While research exists in general OST settings, further study is needed on how cultural responsiveness can

be evaluated and integrated into sport-based OST programs (Whitley et al., 2014).

This study examines cultural responsiveness to clarify the sport structures and conditions that support positive youth outcomes in specific populations (Welty Peachey et al., 2019). We focus on Net Worth (pseudonym), an after-school SBYD program in Florida, USA, engaging Black middle and high school youth from a low-income, underserved community through tennis, a sport not traditionally associated with this population. Our investigation centers on staff mindsets and experiences related to cultural responsiveness. To frame this inquiry, we first reviewed literature on Black youth's access to tennis, SBYD program design, and cultural responsiveness in OST settings.

Black Youths' Access to Tennis

In the U.S., racialized ideologies and socioeconomic disparities shape athletes' access to sport from a young age (Coakley & Pike, 2017; Eitzen, 2016; Hartmann & Manning, 2016). Systemic racism has long marginalized Black youth, including in sports like tennis (Hylton, 2021; Kochanek & Erickson, 2020). Historically, Black Americans were excluded from White tennis clubs and tournaments (Younge, 1971), with efforts to promote the sport within Black communities beginning in 1916 (Lake, 2019; Harris & Kyle-DeBose, 2007). Socioeconomic status also limits sport access, as lower-income neighborhoods often lack safe recreational spaces (Taylor et al., 2011; Wilson, 2002). Racial persecution often intersects with poverty, further restricting opportunities for positive youth development (Ettekal et al., 2020). As a result, Black youth remain underrepresented in tennis despite the media visibility of elite players like Venus and Serena Williams (Destin & Dyer, 2021). According to USTA data, only 9% of youth tennis players in 2013 were Black (Sabo et al., 2013). Ongoing systemic, institutional, and interpersonal discrimination continues to hinder access and inclusion (Eitzen, 2016), making tennis an unconventional yet significant context for SBYD programs targeting Black youth.

Sport-Based Youth Development

SBYD programs in low-income communities aim to support youth development during out-of-school time by addressing critical needs and fostering positive relationships (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012; Sjogren & Melton, 2021; Susnara et al., 2022). These settings can build character and resilience in youth facing racial and economic marginalization (Bopp et al., 2021; Son & Berdychevsky, 2022). However, such programs often operate within hegemonic structures where privileged actors hold power over marginalized communities (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011). Programs that disregard cultural differences and view youth as deficient risk imposing dominant ideologies under the guise of development (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). These "dominating" approaches may perpetuate neocolonial control through rigid expectations and norms (Hartmann, 2001). In response, scholars call for more equitable, socially responsible frameworks that center the needs and agency of youth of color (Kochanek & Erickson, 2020).

SBYD organizations can counter systemic oppression by adopting intentional, equity-focused frameworks and program designs that reduce power imbalances and resist colonialist influences (Sheppard et al., 2023). A key recommendation is to enhance staffing through community representation, demographic diversity, and culturally grounded onboarding and training (Camiré & Santos, 2019; Wegner et al., 2020). Including staff with lived experience and cultural knowledge fosters more inclusive, contextually relevant programming (Clutterbuck & Doherty, 2019; Luguetti et al., 202Specialized0; Svensson et al., 2017). coaches are particularly critical for programs serving marginalized groups, as they can tailor support, build trust, and help participants navigate broader social systems (Bonevski et al., 2014; Van der Veken et al., 2020). Staff who value participants' cultural assets and family beliefs further strengthen program impact (Richmond et al., 2018). However, despite these strategies, the field lacks clear frameworks on how to implement culturally appropriate infrastructures and practices within diverse SBYD settings (Kochanek & Erickson, 2020; Kramers et al., 2021).

While specialized staff are vital, it is equally important to acknowledge the broader limitations of SBYD programs. Scholars caution against viewing sport as inherently beneficial, a belief criticized as sport mystification or evangelism (Coakley, 2011; Sugden, 2010). Sport alone does not guarantee positive outcomes; its developmental value depends on social and contextual factors shaping delivery and youth experiences (Bruner et al., 2021; Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). As Coalter (2013) argues, sport must be integrated with non-sport interventions and broader developmental agendas to produce long-term impacts. Demystifying sport's assumed value helps clarify what conditions are necessary for effective youth development. Sanders (2016) identifies seven structural factors that influence whether sport leads to the intended developmental outcomes.

- Type of sport played (e.g., individual or team-based)
- Orientations and actions of peers, parents, coaches, and administrators (e.g., sport-plus or plus-sport models)
- Norms, class, and culture associated with specific sports or experiences (e.g., upper-class or working-class sports)
- Social characteristics of sport participants (e.g., aggression or calmness)
- Material and cultural contexts under which participation occurs (e.g., structural barriers to playing)
- Social relationships formed through sport participation (e.g., friendships or rivalries)
- Meanings given to sport and experiences (e.g., setting for socialization or competition)

The framework provides insight into sport-related factors that SBYD organizations should focus on to achieve developmental outcomes. However, as SBYD is part of broader OST programs, sport and physical activity are just one component. These programs also include homework support, life skills workshops, career exposure, and opportunities for socialization. To further explore culturally appropriate program design, we reviewed literature on other OST programs that incorporate cultural responsiveness.

Cultural Responsiveness in Out-of-School Time

A review of OST literature on culturally responsive programs highlights the importance of tailoring organizational behaviors, structures, and activities to each agency's unique context, including its setting, resources, goals, and the cultural backgrounds of its clientele (McGovern et al., 2020; Mroczkowski et al., 2022). Additionally, research often examines program design and structure from the perspectives of youth, staff, leadership, or parents.

Non-Sport Programs

Several studies highlight the contextualization of cultural responsiveness in North American non-sport OST programs. Miller (2020) explored how leaders in Western US OST programs can better support minoritized youth by fostering community connections and empowering them through culturally responsive practices. Skelley et al. (2020) discussed the challenges and benefits of implementing culturally responsive teaching in an urban after-school literacy program, emphasizing cultural understanding and student-centered learning. Similarly, Skelley et al. (2022) examined tutor proficiency, curriculum, and the learning environment. McGovern et al. (2020) highlighted how rural youth program leaders support Latinx youth by creating safe spaces, promoting bilingualism, and acting as allies in addressing discrimination. Soto-Lara et al. (2022) examined the role of positive youth-staff relationships and engaging activities in supporting the academic and personal development of Latinx adolescents in an after-school math program.

Yu et al. (2021) identified practices such as fostering an inclusive program climate, engaging in personal conversations, and promoting both math and social-emotional skills in a math program for underprivileged Latinx youth. Yu et al. (2022) found that culturally responsive practices significantly enhance Latinx adolescents' math motivation. Mroczkowski et al. (2022) explored a science-focused, museum-based youth development program, emphasizing themes like program structure, meaningful experiences, and positive peer culture. Ettekal et al. (2020) stressed the importance of integrating ethnic cultural features into activities for Latinx youth and the need for trained staff to implement culturally responsive practices. Khachikian (2019) examined how Armenian youth organizations support second-generation Armenian-Americans by preserving cultural identity and providing social and educational opportunities. Kayser, Jackson, & Kayser (2018) explored the needs of Black adolescent girls in mentoring programs, highlighting the value of family involvement and mentors who share racial identity. Hunter et al. (2022) described the Native Spirit program, aimed at promoting cultural engagement and positive development among American Indian youth. Cummings et al. (2018) studied culturally responsive approaches in STEAM workshops. These studies underscore the importance of cultural responsiveness in OST programs (Simpkins & Riggs, 2014).

Sport-Based Programs

North American sport-based OST programs face distinct challenges and opportunities in implementing culturally responsive practices, with fewer studies available compared to non-sport programs. Lachney et al. (2024) examined a youth boxing program that integrated culturally responsive computing education through collaboration with coaches and educators. Weiss et al. (2023) assessed Girls on the Run's IDEA initiative, highlighting its success in fostering inclusion, reducing participation barriers, and receiving positive feedback from stakeholders. Kramers et al. (2021) emphasized the need for culturally sensitive sport environments to support newcomer youth and families. Fredrick et al. (2020) described the REACH program, which combined literacy and physical activity using a culturally relevant curriculum tailored to diverse,

underserved communities. Clement & Freeman (2023) found that an inclusive after-school sports program enhanced social-emotional development and perspective-taking among adolescents with and without disabilities. These examples illustrate emerging efforts to embed cultural responsiveness within sport-based OST programs.

A notable gap in literature is the lack of studies comparing the effectiveness of culturally responsive practices across sport-based and non-sport-based OST programs. Research in this area could highlight best practices, common challenges, and how different program structures impact youth experiences and outcomes. Such comparisons would offer valuable insights into which strategies foster inclusive, supportive environments, guiding the development of more effective SBYD programs.

Framework

Many studies referenced Simpkins et al. (2017), who conceptualized cultural responsiveness in OST programming. Their framework, based on the National Research Council's eight features of quality after-school activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), highlights how program structure and staff practices shape youth experiences and development. Program structure includes activity types (e.g., sports, homework help), behavioral norms, and developmental opportunities. Staff practices focus on staff knowledge, skills, attitudes, and interactions with youth and families. Table 1 is Simpkins et al.'s (2017) framework. Below are brief definitions of the eight features.

- Physical and psychological safety: ensuring safety from physical harm and unfair treatment, including addressing biases and discrimination.
- Appropriate structure: clear, predictable rules and effective monitoring, considering cultural appropriateness.
- Supportive relationships: promoting closeness, communication, and guidance through structured activities, strengthening positive relationships.
- Opportunities to belong: helping youth navigate conflicting cultural pressures and fostering a sense of belonging.
- Positive social norms: encouraging pro-social norms, valuing diversity, and respecting different social norms.
- Support for efficacy and mattering: empowering youth through autonomy, community impact, and leadership roles, tailored to cultural backgrounds.
- Opportunities for skill building: providing opportunities to build various skills, including navigating multiple cultural worlds.
- Integration of family, school, and community efforts: strengthening ties between family, school, and community to promote positive youth development.

METHODS

Research Context

This case study examines the experiences of Net Worth staff with cultural responsiveness in a tennis after-school program in a midsized suburban city in Florida. Many southern US states, including Florida, grapple with post-colonial subordination, racism, and inequality stemming from historical race-based oppression (Payne et al., 2019). Black youth and families in this community face economic, educational, and structural barriers, such as housing discrimination, limited access to affordable food, educational achievement gaps, and few tennis courts.

Net Worth, a branch of the county's Community Tennis Association (CTA), was founded in 2004 to advocate for public tennis courts and provide tennis instruction in public schools. In response to community demand, the CTA added health, academics, and character development to its after-school tennis programming, leading to the creation of Net Worth. The program expanded between 2013 and 2015, serving 100 elementary school age youth across nine sites. With support from the Department of Parks and Recreation, it shifted focus to middle and high school students.

In 2017, Net Worth partnered with a nearby university to offer homework assistance and enrichment activities. The pilot program, initially twice a week, expanded to five days per week by 2019. In 2020, Net Worth moved into its own after-school location, the "teen center," but damages to the building led to another relocation. By 2021, the program moved into an unoccupied elementary school building, where it operated through the 2021-2022 academic year, sharing space with two other youth programs.

Research Participants

At the time of this investigation Net Worth consisted of 118 members, including (16) board members, (5) administrators, (26) staff, (22) volunteers, and (49) youth participants. The five administrators, all identifying as White, were responsible for overseeing the program behind the scenes. The 26 staff members managed daily programming. Five staff members led with the positions of high school director, high school coordinator, middle school director, middle school coordinator, and post-secondary coordinator. Of the 26 staff 18 were women, including 13 Black women. All staff members were between the ages of

19-29, except for the designated van driver who was the parent of a participant.

Volunteers played a critical role, with 22 individuals assisting as academic tutors, tennis coaches, and general support. Of the volunteers, 14 identified as White, 7 Asian American, and one Black. All volunteers were also between the ages of 19-29, except for a long-standing volunteer tennis coach who was between the ages of 50-60. The program served 49 youth participants, including 24 high schoolers and 25 middle schoolers, all identified as Black. Eligibility for the free tennis program was limited to families with household incomes at or below 200% of the (2021) Federal Poverty Income Guidelines.

Research Question

Net Worth was purposefully selected for this study because it involves both White and Black adults coaching and mentoring Black youth in a community historically subjected to prejudice, using an unconventional sport. This setting provides a unique opportunity to explore SBYD staff experiences and cultural responsiveness. The central question guiding our inquiry was: What does cultural responsiveness look like in Net Worth?

We adopted a constructivist ontological stance, which posits that reality is socially constructed through interactions and processes. This perspective allows us to examine how the cultural backgrounds and social dynamics of youth participants influence the staff's experiences and perceptions of the program. By centering the staff's lived experiences, we prioritize their voices and stories in the analysis. Additionally, we used an interpretivist epistemological approach, which emphasizes the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals. This approach enables us to capture the rich and varied perspectives of the staff, while also considering the significance of cultural context and social interactions. These constructivist and interpretivist approaches align with qualitative research methods, offering a flexible and in-depth exploration of cultural responsiveness in this specific context.

Participant Observation

Data collection began with participant observation during spring and summer 2022 to understand community experiences in their natural setting, foster authentic interactions, and establish credibility within the organization (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Over 12 weeks, the first author conducted 53 observations across 14 tennis trainings, 23 academic/enrichment sessions, 8 staff meetings, and 8 leisure activities. Field notes documented activity types, youth engagement, student-staff interactions, emerging ideas, and self-reflexive commentary. Observations preceded the semi-structured interviews to reduce bias and inform the development of the interview guide. This preliminary data shaped the interview protocol, and observations continued afterward to ensure robust and comprehensive data collection.

Interviews

Following several weeks of observation, we conducted semi-structured interviews to explore personal experiences and practices related to program design and delivery. A total of 29 individuals were interviewed: 5 administrators, 18 staff members, and 6 volunteers (see Table 2 for demographics). These roles were prioritized due to their direct involvement in program management and implementation. Board members and youth were not interviewed, as they were not responsible for these aspects and their input was outside the scope of this study.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one, either in a private on-site room or via Zoom, depending on participant's preference. Sessions occurred before, during, or after programming and lasted 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo for analysis.

Other Data Sources

Organizational documents, both printed and digital, served as another key data source (Bowen, 2009). These included materials such as advertisements, brochures, social media posts, budgets, tax forms, reports, media coverage, schedules, and public records. Physical artifacts, such as tennis courts, equipment, classrooms, event spaces, and community resources, also supplemented the textual data.

Data Analysis

To uphold ethical standards, this study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and all 29 interviewees provided written informed consent. Confidentiality was ensured by replacing identifiers with pseudonyms, such as renaming the organization "Net Worth", with interviewees selecting their own pseudonyms. The researcher redacted names from interviews, field notes, and documents accordingly.

To ensure trustworthiness, multiple data sources were used to capture diverse perspectives (Tracy, 2010). Member checking allowed participants to validate interpretations, and the 12-week engagement within Net Worth established

credibility. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic process, with deductive coding based on Simpkins et al.'s (2017) framework for culturally responsive OST programs and Sanders' (2016) seven SFD factors. The second and third authors reviewed findings for coherence with the study's goals, literature, and methodology.

Positionality

The authors were positioned as outsiders in this research, not being from the local community or members of Net Worth. This outsider perspective proved beneficial for observing and analyzing events and structures, as it allowed for noticing nuances that insiders might overlook due to familiarity (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Additionally, the researcher conducting the interviews found that being an outsider encouraged interviewees to speak more freely and transparently about their interactions with youth and colleagues.

RESULTS

This section presents findings that address our research question: What does cultural responsiveness look like in Net Worth? We have organized the results from the deductive analysis into two sections, based on the proposed OST and SBYD frameworks. The first section corresponds to Simpkins et al. (2017) eight features of culturally responsive OST programs, while the second aligns with Sanders' (2016) seven factors that influence whether sport leads to intended developmental outcomes. Table 2 outlines the demographic specifics of the interviewees, emphasizing the diversity of participants and supporting the inclusion of direct quotes.

Culturally Responsive Practices

The following sections illustrate data on Net Worth's programming, showing how each of Simpkins et al. (2017) features were exhibited to varying degrees, with unique attributes and challenges. Representative themes and quotes for this framework appear within the text and in Table 3.

Physical and Psychological Safety

A safe space, free from physical harm, bias, discrimination, and power imbalances, is essential for youth learning and engagement (Simpkins et al., 2017). Staff consistently described Net Worth as both physically and psychologically safe, emphasizing its welcoming, "home away from home" atmosphere. Morgan explained, "So Net Worth is providing first and foremost, a safe place. A place for youth to go to and then also providing additional benefits within that space." Gene added, "It's a safe space as well... for a lot of our kids, they don't have that at home." After-school programs can cultivate a safe and trusting environment for positive development in minority youth (Fuller et al., 2013).

Given that many youth and families had experienced trauma, the program intentionally cultivated trust and safety (Hussey et al., 2023). John highlighted, "That pattern... builds trust and safety for youth. They need to feel like they can trust somebody." Kendall elaborated, "Many families go through generational curses... having Net Worth, it creates a different point of view for those students." Net Worth employed a trauma-informed approach, described as "trauma-based" by staff, with attention to potential triggers and the socio-cultural impacts of racism (Folco, 2023). James captured this mindset: "If they come in and they got something going on... We're not gonna be that next level of ignoring that." Joshua reflected on this framework from his onboarding: "We also talked about in the orientation trauma informed care... Some students might not be as warm, welcome, and friendly... because they've had experiences... that make them more cautious."

This trauma-informed lens also guided programming decisions. While some activities were proactively vetted, others required reactive changes. Kendall recalled one incident: "The game... would have required them to recollect something traumatic... a lot of them haven't overcame it yet. So you have to be careful... we never want that. We say this is a safe space." Interpersonal interactions were shaped by this lens (Christensen & Rubin, 2022), especially in behavior management. Staff emphasized pausing to consider external factors behind youth resistance. Chris shared: "So they were both saying they want to hit (tennis balls) with me... That's kind of a (argument) problem where you have to understand what wants, needs and triggers."

Staff were also attuned to how communication could unintentionally trigger youth. Carter noted: "In every situation it's just knowing your people... you can know if they have trigger words or trigger actions." Sweety added, "Dealing with students who have experienced trauma, you can't use terms and phrases like that..." Craig explained further: "You never know when you're gonna trigger somebody... maybe if you raise your voice, you might remind them of their dad..." Gene emphasized respectful communication: "It's using... the language. I think language is really important... it's always out of a place of love." Avoiding disempowering language extended to institutional norms. James explained, "We try to stay away from the word serve or service because it creates a power deficit... we try to focus on partnership."

Physical safety protocols were also emphasized, from daily arrival to end-of-day pick-up. Staff described the risks and emotional toll of managing youth who tried to flee into the surrounding neighborhood. Ralph noted that Net Worth adapted to such challenges: "Net Worth is adaptable and takes every situation into account to make sure those students' needs are being met. Providing mental health options... wasn't like that when we were growing up."

In response to growing mental health needs, the organization hired a full-time counselor. Samantha shared: "They just hired a counselor. And in that space, they're given the opportunity to talk about their emotions, process some of the traumas..." Materials such as referral forms and messaging on social media reinforced this value. One Facebook post read: "Our youth have faced unprecedented challenges this year. Your support allows us to partner with youth to navigate life's turbulence and develop social and emotional skills..."

Appropriate Structures

Effective after-school programming requires adaptable structures that reflect the needs of youth and families, including behavioral expectations, relationships, and activity design (Simpkins et al., 2017). At Net Worth, staff prioritized youth and family voice in shaping program components, regularly soliciting input through both formal and informal channels. This feedback helped guide everything from tennis drills to life skills workshops, fundraisers, and year-end celebrations. Gene explained this practice:

What we try to do at the beginning of every semester is come together as a group and allow the students to brainstorm what they would like... For the parents we do a lot of needs assessments... hearing from them, what ways could we step in and assist?

Craig reinforced the importance of empowering youth opinions: "And letting all the kids voice what they want... maybe there are some kids that were like, I wish we did more structured stuff."

Staff used this input to ensure goals were relevant and responsive. While college preparation was emphasized, they also recognized that it wasn't the right path for every student. This aligns with Carlson's (2016) critique of a one-size-fits-all college push, especially for low-income youth. David shared: "For instance, we have [student] who went to the firefighters' program... There are many things... that are more technical things to learn." John echoed the need to focus beyond academics: "When you just harp on the academics... But if we build the student up social emotionally... then that student... will be more motivated to do well in school."

Balancing autonomy and structure emerged as a key theme. Staff navigated giving students voice while maintaining boundaries to avoid chaos. Craig reflected: "Do you give more structure... or do you have less... to build relationships... What is the goal of your program?" Carter added: "A child's need for structure often bumps up with their need for autonomy... there is a struggle within the program of what do we allow them to do and what do we make them do?" This tension reflects Flaherty and Sagas' (2021) findings on the importance of co-constructed experiences between youth agency and program structure to sustain participation.

Staff also emphasized culturally relevant behavior management practices, often using positive reinforcement strategies to support engagement. Incentives played a key role in participation and motivation. Rebecca noted: "Finding different ways to get them to interact... having the rewards, whether it be like food or money... gets them to feeling confident." Flower added: "So [incentives] kind of gives people the motivation... if someone's doing something... then what do they gonna get outta it?" During field observations, staff used incentives like point cards or increased recreation time to reinforce participation in academic and enrichment activities. This approach aligns with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which emphasize reinforcing strengths over punishment. As Gadd & Butler (2020) argue, PBIS strategies must be culturally appropriate to reduce disparities.

Supportive Relationships

Culturally responsive adult–youth relationships are central to effective after-school programming (Simpkins et al., 2017). At Net Worth, care, trust, and support cultivated a strong sense of community. As James described, "It's a family, really ultimately it's the simplest way to put it." Gene echoed this sentiment: "Family is definitely something that you hear around amongst the kids and their families." Others repeated the "Net Worth family" theme, with Sweety stating, "The thing that always comes to me is Net Worth family. That the organization is more than just a nonprofit," and Craig adding, "I would say family... everybody continues to come every year."

Daily program structures supported these relationships. One such structure was the daily 'opening-circle,' where students shared "day highs" and reviewed the schedule.

Craig described it as "just giving an open environment for everybody to voice anything." Staff also noted its value in easing anxiety for youth impacted by trauma. However, over time, the routine became less engaging. Field observations revealed that both staff and students increasingly rushed through the activity, focusing more on announcements than on personal sharing. As a result, many interviewees noted that the most meaningful relationship-building often occurred organically through daily interactions.

Intentional staff practices were key to nurturing relationships. These included consistent presence, learning youths' names, and engaging with their lives. As Kately noted, staff made "such an effort to get a smile on the kid's face and just make them welcome and appreciated and loved." Chris emphasized everyday consistency: "A big part of it is just talking to them through like every day over the course of weeks... Names are important." Joshua agreed: "Try to recognize students… Letting them know that I recognize you, I acknowledge you… that consistency is important to the success." Staff also built rapport by taking interest in youth experiences. Sean described this with a student learning sign language: "She's learning sign language... Really showing interest in what they're doing at school... can be really helpful for them to develop trust."

Emotional support was another key strategy. Lewis explained, "They need love, they need motivation... They want encouragement so that they can keep on doing better." Carter shared how sensitivity shaped his interactions: "When they catch an attitude, respecting their space... I don't pretend to know them before they give me that end." These culturally responsive and emotionally attuned practices helped build trust and belonging, reinforcing Net Worth's family-oriented approach to youth development.

Opportunities to Belong

Culturally responsive after-school programs foster belonging by affirming youth identities and creating meaningful connections to their communities (Simpkins et al., 2017). Net Worth structured several program components to encourage leadership, expression, and community building. One such opportunity was the Coaches in Training (CIT) initiative, which provided youth with paid leadership roles. As Sweety explained: "Our CIT program...is basically a way for them to get paid which is a huge motivation...giving them jobs is great for building leadership skills and confidence and helping them feel like they're needed."

Net Worth also emphasized self-expression through culturally resonant activities. Music was a popular outlet; an in-house studio allowed students to record songs and engineer beats. The program also brought in local Black artists to lead workshops in dance, poetry, and theater. Kendall highlighted this shift toward cultural inclusion: "They wanted to play like pop. Kids don't listen to pop…they like certain music and that's what makes them feel safe and comfortable. Because it's a part of their culture."

Student-led events further contributed to belonging. Samantha noted, "Creating events and having things for them to look forward to... helps with that sense of belonging." One key example was the student-organized end-of-year banquet themed "Black Excellence." Students managed planning, decorations, performances, and event hosting. Their collaboration demonstrated how meaningful roles fostered community. Youth voice was intentionally centered in activity design. Susan described co-constructing lessons around social justice topics: "We would ask the students...if it was something they were interested in... and let them pick one. So... we still are trying to find opportunities mostly centered around... what activity we're to do today."

Activity structure also influenced inclusivity. Sweety noted: "Best practice is that you set up stations... If a kid has to go hunt down a ball, more than likely they'll just sit... and not play." To expand participation, staff offered less competitive games like Uno and charades. Lewis affirmed, "It just gets all the students working together and helping them to feel like they're included in the activity."

Despite these efforts, social dynamics among youth sometimes undermined inclusivity. Lewis observed: "Some of the students have problems with each other...that makes it harder for them to get included... [Executive Director] does a great job at... bridging that gap." Stephen acknowledged the challenge of middle and high school cliques: "It's hard that they should all be friends... But in terms of being welcoming, I think it's very welcoming to all the students." Staff struggled to fully manage peer-based exclusion. Carter reflected: "You can't be everywhere at once...you have to protect them from the other children... So I think we do a great job making the kids feel inclusive, but we also need to protect them if other kids aren't." These peer exclusions sometimes hindered engagement, aligning with Sjogren & Melton (2021), who found that disrespect and social tensions among youth can limit participation in group activities, even in inclusive environments.

Positive Social Norms

Social norms within OST programs reflect how values, expectations, and behaviors are communicated and upheld. Culturally responsive programs move beyond assimilationist frameworks and instead promote respect, diversity, and inclusivity (Simpkins et al., 2017). Net Worth staff and participants acknowledged both the transformative nature of the program and the areas where stronger social norm structures were needed. Flower, a former participant, spoke to the program's personal impact: "Net Worth's really a program where it helps kids transform themselves in what they can become in the future…It transformed me into growing up and maturing and seeing the things I need to grow about myself."

Despite this, the program lacked clearly defined expectations around behavior and social norms. James noted the need for more formal codes, while John explained the reactive approach to policy development: "So we need better policies...Each step along the way, we just realize, oh we need a policy for that. But we don't know until a conflict gets brought to our desk or until you go through the conflict."

Staff often found it challenging to manage behavior in a trauma-informed yet respectful way. Samantha reflected on the difficulty of balancing authority and understanding: "I understand that we're working from the trauma informed approach, but there does need to be more respect shown to the adults here from the students...managing respect in that sense." Stephen emphasized teaching responsibility and respect for shared spaces: "They just kind of throw their trash on the floor…So I would like to see more responsibility in developing the skill of taking initiative." Gene promoted mutual respect by encouraging reflection: "I tell them that I do not expect you to respect me because I'm an adult. I expect you to respect me because I respect you."

The program incorporated restorative justice circles to address conflict, though with mixed results. John emphasized a healing-centered approach: "We try to restore and heal…that the organization cares about resolving this." Still, fostering respect across cultural and identity differences remained difficult. Kelly described a lack of understanding among students about gender identity: "They identify as a non-binary, but actually, no one knew...we really gotta get our kids out there so that they can see those cultural differences." Alex described navigating a moment of cultural insensitivity: "I pulled him aside and was, Hey, you just can't say they look like this person...how would you feel if I said, oh, you look like him...I think you should apologize...And eventually he did."

Staff members from Caribbean backgrounds shared challenges related to cultural identity. Lewis explained: "I identify myself within my Caribbean descent, specifically my Haitian descent...there is a difference." Gene recounted a moment of cultural misunderstanding: "They said that Black people can't speak two languages. So it's been a lot like deconstructing their ideas."

Religious differences also proved complex. David described a confrontation about belief: "He was just like, you're going to hell. And I said, that's your belief...there's a lot of cultures who don't think Jesus Christ was the son of God." Ralph reflected on differing cultural traditions: "Everyone...was mentioning New Year's Eve church...It's just a completely different experience that I had. And still have because I'm not religious."

These experiences illustrate the challenges Net Worth faced in promoting positive social norms across differences in identity, culture, and beliefs. As Lauver (2004) notes, high-quality OST programs develop prosocial norms to sustain engagement. Similarly, Gildin & Lobman (2023) emphasize that cultivating respect and relationships is central to promoting equity and justice. At Net Worth, fostering inclusive norms was a continuous learning process rooted in reflection, relationship-building, and responsiveness to youth needs.

Support Efficacy and Mattering

After-school programs play a vital role in fostering youths' sense of efficacy and mattering by validating their cultural heritage, interests, and experiences. These spaces can empower young people to believe they have influence within their communities and broader society (Simpkins et al., 2017). At Net Worth, staff and youth alike identified how intentional practices cultivated this sense of agency and inclusion. James illustrated how long-term participation and community-building fostered empowerment:

We're at the point now where we have 11 or 12th graders who have been in this program since their sixth-grade year. I think that those two things can be combined. The self-efficacy and the community where they are empowered to build their own community...Net Worth has supported that growth in a lot of different ways. I think it's through deliberate activities and field trips and trying to instill values.

The program intentionally created opportunities for students to use their voices and process their emotions in meaningful ways. Samantha described the importance of emotional expression for youth, particularly those who may not have such opportunities at home:

Not really ever being able to hold space for those emotions or those things that we are going through...they may not be given, especially within their homes, the opportunity to really talk much about what they're going through or how they're feeling.

Gene emphasized validating youth feelings and affirming their emotional experiences as part of creating a supportive environment: "…hearing from both sides, reinforces that their voice matters, their feelings matter...Making it seem like it's a bad thing that I'm reacting this way."

Net Worth staff also sought to understand and affirm youths' unique ways of communicating. Morgan discussed adapting to their speech patterns and cultural interests: "So there's always gonna be different patterns of speech or slang...Part of it is an age thing, but then also I think part of it is a cultural thing." James reflected on the complexity of affirming youth culture without crossing into cultural appropriation: "Cultural competence at a certain point felt to me just like using the same language and slang that the kids do...It wasn't authentic." These moments highlight the fine line staff walk between supporting youth expression and ensuring authenticity in engagement.

Addressing difficult conversations around identity and difference was also part of empowering youth. Kelly shared how a real-time teachable moment around gender identity emerged: "...the student who said, hey girl, they were like coach Kelly what does non-binary mean? He genuinely didn't know what that meant. So of course, I just feel like we really gotta get our kids out there so that they can see those cultural differences."

Ultimately, Net Worth worked to make students feel seen, heard, and capable of contributing meaningfully to their environment. In line with Dawes et al. (2017), the organization sought to empower students by giving them responsibilities, space for expression, and opportunities to reflect and grow. These experiences fostered not only self-confidence but also a sense of purpose and belonging.

Opportunities for Skill Building

Culturally responsive after-school programs can play a critical role in helping ethnic and racial minority youth navigate their multicultural realities, particularly when their identities are marginalized or subject to discrimination (Simpkins et al., 2017). These programs support youth in developing the skills to reconcile cultural differences, code-switch, and build positive ethnic/racial identities (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2018). At Net Worth, staff intentionally embedded cultural pride and social justice themes into skill-building activities to affirm and empower Black youth. Alice emphasized the importance of cultural representation in building self-esteem and pride:

Almost all our students are African American so we definitely focused a lot on that. We have Black history month walls…We've had African American presence in baseball, arts and culture basketball, all these different fields...We try to make 'em proud of their culture for sure. And that makes 'em feel good to be here and to be around people that really support them and support their whole culture.

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Net Worth reaffirmed its commitment to anti-racist practices and culturally affirming education. The organization posted a public statement of solidarity:

We are not just here to celebrate our student's accomplishments, but also to be a lending hand when uncertainty and fear arise...We remain committed to continually dismantling white supremacy and institutional racism in our community and school system here in [the] county...#BLACKLIVESMATTER

Staff wove these values into program design. Susan described how the theme of "Black Excellence" informed both historic and contemporary curriculum efforts:

This past year with Black excellence, we really tried to stick with that. We tried to create activities around it...just giving them the education of Black history and then even modern social justice movements, more like racial justice.

These celebrations were not symbolic alone; they were tied to tangible skill-building and identity development. Net Worth leveraged partnerships with local community programs, universities, and online platforms to offer enrichment sessions. These included workshops on mental health, social-emotional learning, and real-life issues youth face. Syd reflected on one such topic: "We have a new one [enrichment]. And they talk about toxic relationships and toxic friendships…That kinda stuff is very important...Some of these kids don't know they're in toxic relationships." Staff also facilitated workshops that provided hands-on learning and cultural exposure. Gene shared about a gardening session that initially met resistance but ultimately expanded students' understanding:

The kids don't wanna do the gardening…They have fun, they complained, but they liked it…But sometimes they need to learn something. They don't know what a radish plant looked like. You saw them. They didn't know what fertilizer is.

Not every activity resonated with every student, but the program allowed space for discovery. Sweety noted: "Even if it's going out and looking for birds out in nature, that doesn't resonate with everyone. There might be one or two kids that, that is a **t**ransformational experience for." Crucially, Net Worth brought in guest speakers and facilitators who reflected the identities and lived experiences of the youth. Gene explained the importance of representation and intentionality: "What I've come to find is they only see what's within their community...because a lot of them say they're Black, they're not smart. It's being intentional about the people we have coming in."

Despite these strengths, the program faced challenges with overscheduling. When enrichment activities became too frequent or content-heavy, student disengagement increased. However, staff remained committed to making cultural celebration and skill development central pillars of the program. These practices are consistent with culturally responsive education frameworks (D'Andrea Martínez et al., 2023), which show that affirming students' identities through meaningful curriculum improves outcomes for marginalized youth. Moreover, Net Worth's approach reflects Osai et al.'s (2024) emphasis on youth-driven, social justice–oriented programming that centers voice, belonging, and agency. By integrating life skills with cultural affirmation, the program helped youth navigate their worlds with greater confidence, pride, and resilience (Seccombe, 2002).

Integrating Family, School, and Community Efforts

OST programs can support youth development by leveraging partnerships with families, schools, and communities to offer culturally responsive and community-rooted experiences (Simpkins et al., 2017). At Net Worth, these collaborations were intentionally designed to deepen youth engagement, affirm cultural identity, and foster collective responsibility.

One strategy involved organizing events and service projects in the surrounding neighborhoods. These were often centered around cultural representation and Black community empowerment. James affirmed the importance of this approach: "I think there are a lot of culturally representative activities that are selected. I think it's cool that even service projects are oriented towards work in the Black communities here." Net Worth also sought to bridge communication between home and program through the intentional integration of family knowledge. A dedicated Community and Family Outreach Coordinator served as a liaison to build trust and respond to families' social-emotional and academic needs: "So my responsibility, I'm sort of the liaison between our parents and teachers, between community resources and our families, and between our students and teachers...any assistance or resources for our families." Beyond program walls, staff took part in broader community advocacy. This included attending school board meetings and advocating for equitable policies on behalf of youth and families. Joshua expressed appreciation for this level of involvement:

I think at least the Executive Director, maybe some of the others involved go to school, board meetings and advocate for educational equity...I really appreciate the fact that Net Worth is involved in other ways in the community as well.

Net Worth's efforts to engage families, however, encountered systemic challenges. Many caregivers faced time, financial, or structural barriers that made engagement difficult. Kendall highlighted how assumptions about family availability clashed with the realities of their community:

A lot of our kids don't have their dad and a lot of our kids don't even have their mom. A lot of our kids are raised by their grandparents. A lot of our kids are raised by the system, that just don't work that way.

James reinforced this point, underscoring the stress families experience in under-resourced environments:

We do parent engagement...But parents don't wanna meet. We work in under-resourced communities. Parents are often busy and under a lot of stresses, outside of any kind of extra BS we're trying to put on top of them as an after-school program.

In addition to logistical barriers, staff members navigated complex racial and cultural dynamics in their roles as community partners. Some reflected on the need for self-awareness and humility when engaging across lines of racial difference. Morgan acknowledged the discomfort of holding power in a context where she was racially in the minority: "Being a White woman, I don't have to feel uncomfortable in my life...coming into a group where I am a minority but still in a position of power." Similarly, Sweety shared a moment of learning in her work:

That situation...really was like a big good kick in the pants of, Sweety, just because you feel really strongly about something doesn't mean that everybody feels that way...I need to be open to the fact that not everyone has the same experience that I have.

These reflections reveal that culturally responsive

partnerships require more than logistical outreach, they demand ongoing personal reflection and cultural humility from staff. This aligns with Kreider & Westmoreland (2011), who argue that authentic family engagement in OST settings must confront challenges such as communication gaps, scheduling barriers, and mistrust, especially in historically marginalized communities. Their work underscores that partnerships are most effective when they are collaborative, flexible, and rooted in a deep respect for the lived experiences of families.

At Net Worth, while challenges remain, these efforts to bridge youth, family, and community across cultural and institutional boundaries reflect the growing understanding that youth thrive when their full ecosystem is engaged in their growth.

Sport for Development Factors

Despite the growth of SBYD research, limited scholarship has examined how culturally responsive frameworks apply to sport structures. Simpkins et al.'s (2017) OST framework did not address sport as a core program component. To explore the role of sport at Net Worth, Sanders' (2016) seven SFD factors were used to evaluate how tennis was leveraged in a culturally responsive way within a predominantly Black youth program. Representative themes and quotes for this framework appear within the text and in Table 4.

Tennis, a sport embedded in White, upper-class culture (Lake, 2019), was the foundational sport at Net Worth, although youth engagement was uneven and not oriented toward competition. Coaches emphasized drills and skill-building over performance outcomes. Susan explained: "They come in and it is like a formal tennis practice. They run through drills...they teach them how to play properly...That would be our actual sport curriculum and it's only one day a week." As James noted, tennis constituted only a minor part of the program: "They have to play tennis once a week. And even then, that doesn't always happen...we try our best because that's like teaching life skills." This reflects a plus-sport model (Coalter, 2007), where sport is a secondary element to broader developmental goals. James reinforced this orientation: "Everyone in this program knows I'm not about tennis."

Tennis served as a medium to foster transferable skills like leadership, perseverance, and responsibility. As Flower shared: "They could have leadership skills just by running a drill...the more they get out there and the more they understand the better things get." Gene further connected this to stepping beyond comfort zones: "At least you say you tried rather than not trying at all...that's what the message of tennis sent to the kids." Jones et al. (2017), who argue that sport can be a powerful context for promoting positive youth development when implemented with intentionality and structured support.

Tennis, often associated with White, affluent spaces, was culturally unfamiliar to many participants. John explained how this unfamiliarity made the sport both a challenge and an opportunity: "I have started to view [tennis] as a way to break down barriers and a way to break down stereotypes...in communities where it's not stereotypically taught." Craig highlighted economic exclusion: "Most tennis players have money...you gotta pay 60 bucks an hour to go learn from somebody...most people don't even get involved in tennis." John noted broader forms of exclusion: "There's way more barriers than just cost...There's stereotypes...There's 'I don't know if I belong in a place like that." These reflections echo Goff et al. (2024), who emphasize the need for cultural humility and community collaboration in co-designing relevant and decolonizing SBYD programs, especially in historically marginalized communities.

While some staff had personal connections to tennis, they acknowledged its cultural disconnect. Sweety shared: "My parents really loved tennis. I never did...I didn't really like it, I'm not very competitive." This dissonance highlights the challenges of implementing culturally unfamiliar sports, a point also emphasized by Strachan (2021), who found that Indigenous youth were more likely to engage with physical activity when programs respected and reflected their cultural contexts.

Structural barriers, including access to courts and equipment, were persistent. Net Worth mitigated these by providing tennis gear and transporting youth to local facilities. Syd described what success looked like logistically: "A successful day...they actually brought their clothes...they will have their rackets, know where their rackets are." Still, engagement was often low. Kelly described her challenges: "A bad day in tennis is nobody is trying to dress up. I'm bribing kids and they're still not listening…a lot of them don't like tennis." This tension reflects the findings of Ettekal et al. (2020), who argue that successful engagement in organized activities requires responsiveness to the cultural values and preferences of the youth and families involved.

Tennis sessions often allowed youth input on which drills to run. However, the fixed weekly requirement of tennis, even if loosely enforced, could undermine authentic choice, especially given widespread disinterest among youth. While not explicitly addressed in staff narratives, this dynamic

suggests a tension between structure and autonomy in programming, a dilemma common in OST programs that attempt to blend structure with culturally responsive practices (Jones et al., 2017).

Tennis sessions created opportunities for forming caring adult-youth relationships. John reflected: "What's important for a youth to develop well...is a relationship with one caring adult...Net Worth provides those caring relationships...in the context of sport and more specifically tennis." These relationships were central to the developmental model, positioning coaches as mentors rather than instructors. Staff recognized that tennis alone was insufficient for the emotional and social support youth needed. David emphasized the need for a more holistic approach: "Doing after-school tennis...isn't enough. These kids need more help with tutoring, life lessons, just kind of to steer them in the right direction." This supports Cooper et al.'s (2020) call for leadership that actively challenges inequities through multi-level strategies (micro, meso, macro), including reimagining who sport is for and how it is delivered.

Net Worth's tennis program embodied the plus-sport model by using sport as a tool for life skill development and cultural exploration. While youth participation was mixed and tennis remained culturally misaligned for some, staff efforts to reframe the sport as a mechanism for empowerment and inclusion revealed promising, if still developing, culturally responsive practices. These findings underscore the need for more deliberate frameworks that center race, culture, and identity in SBYD programming, an area still under-theorized in OST and sport literature.

DISCUSSION

This study explores cultural responsiveness in a SBYD after-school program by comparing Net Worth's practices with Simpkins et al.'s (2017) and Sanders' (2016) frameworks. The discussion highlights a key takeaway, an area for improvement, and sport-specific implications.

Redefining Success

A central finding was Net Worth's redefinition of success in youth engagement, behavior, and outcomes (Dawes et al., 2017). Culturally responsive programming involved tailoring expectations to the youth's unique contexts and capacities (Simpkins et al., 2017). Although Net Worth aimed to promote health, academics, and character through tennis, traditional success metrics were often misaligned with the realities of this historically marginalized population (Kochanek & Erickson, 2020). As a result, the organization adapted its goals to better reflect its community's needs.

For instance, while many OST programs prioritize academic achievement (Granger, 2008), staff recognized that conventional academic pathways, especially those centered on the inequitable, capitalistic college system, were not ideal for all participants (Mustaffa & Dawson, 2021). Instead, they supported both high school completion and alternative learning aligned with students' career interests. This shift was informed by the local educational context in the southeastern U.S., where Black students have historically faced systemic discrimination (Bartz & Kritsonis, 2019). Research underscores the value of alternative educational pathways for marginalized youth (Curtis & Butler, 2021).

Character development was also integral (Newman, 2020). Beyond academics and tennis, the program exposed youth to new experiences, people, and ideas. However, staff continually navigated challenges in selecting relevant enrichment activities and speakers and maintaining a balanced schedule. Redefining life skills meant aligning program goals with students' values, fostering an inclusive, meaningful environment (Camiré et al., 2019). This approach reflects findings that character development supports emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Lantos et al., 2020).

Cultural plurality

A key component of cultural responsiveness is recognizing the multiplicity and fluidity of cultural groups (Simpkins et al., 2017). Data showed that Net Worth struggled with acknowledging cultural plurality. While adults and youth shared some social identities, differences in race/ethnicity, age, and home life were evident. Although discussions largely centered on Black and White cultural dynamics, sub-cultural distinctions also emerged (Aspinall & Song, 2013). For instance, while most staff and all youth identified as Black, not all shared the same ethnic identity. Some identified as Caribbean Black, specifically Haitian or Bahamian, but reported that their Southern African American and White peers often overlooked or misunderstood their cultural backgrounds. They also noted that many youth lacked awareness of Caribbean cultures. These staff felt reduced to a generalized Southern African American identity, a pattern the literature warns may reinforce stereotypes and obscure diversity within racial groups (Williams & Deutsch, 2016). Genuine cultural responsiveness requires acknowledging these sub-cultural distinctions (Simpkins et al., 2017).

Cultural responsiveness also involves recognizing the

generational fluidity of culture (Piccardo, 2019). At Net Worth, generational gaps between staff (ranging from college-aged to middle-aged) and youth (ages 11–18) led to disconnects in music, language, social media, fashion, and pop culture. These differences were noted across racial lines. Additional cultural variation included family structure, socioeconomic status, father-figure involvement, education values, and religious practices. To improve cultural responsiveness, Net Worth must better recognize the cultural plurality among its members and adapt to evolving generational norms. Research supports the need for intentional diversity efforts in OST programs, including staff training, diversified leadership, and programming that affirms cultural differences (Redd et al., 2020).

Culturally Responsive Sport Structures

Cultural responsiveness in SBYD programs extends beyond day-to-day interactions, it requires addressing systemic and environmental barriers that shape how inclusivity is perceived and enacted. At Net Worth, a tennis-focused SBYD program, this means confronting the historical and institutional exclusion of Black youth from tennis and working to dismantle those persistent barriers. Historically, tennis has excluded Black youth, contributing to alienation and limited engagement. Net Worth must do more than offer access to the sport, it must also challenge ingrained perceptions by educating staff and participants on this legacy and promoting inclusivity and critical consciousness (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). Institutional obstacles, such as inequitable policies and underrepresentation in leadership, can discourage participation and hinder responsiveness. Addressing these barriers requires inclusive policies, equitable practices, and ongoing staff education. Research suggests that participation in competitive settings can also enhance motivation and retention among athletes (Blegen et al., 2012).

Social barriers, including stereotypes and societal attitudes, further complicate engagement. Assumptions about who belongs in tennis can dissuade Black youth from participating. Net Worth can counteract these forces by promoting diverse role models and cultivating an environment of respect and inclusion. This involves training staff, coaches, and participants in cultural responsiveness to better support the diverse needs of youth. Sustainable progress also demands long-term structural change. Equity-oriented policies, continuous professional development, and intentional outreach to diverse communities are essential. By actively addressing systemic inequities and reshaping cultural narratives, Net Worth can foster a program where all youth feel seen, supported, and empowered. Cultural responsiveness is not just about access to play, it's about transforming how culture, communication, and operations are understood and implemented. Through intentional, empowering strategies, Net Worth can help dismantle racial inequities and create lasting impact.

Limitations and future directions

While this research highlights cultural responsiveness as a key component of SBYD, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study did not include interviews with the board of directors. Their limited involvement in daily operations and minimal engagement with youth led to their exclusion; however, their decision-making influence emerged later in the study, suggesting that their perspectives could have strengthened the findings. Similarly, parents were not interviewed, despite their potential to offer valuable insights into mechanisms contributing to program outcomes (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic also posed challenges, delaying the study's start and necessitating a shift to virtual programming (LeCrom & Martin, 2022). Upon resuming in-person activities, mask mandates, though essential, caused anxiety among some participants and staff, influencing program dynamics.

Although culturally responsive practices in OST settings are broadly supported, more research is needed to understand their specific effects on outcomes such as academic achievement, social-emotional development, community engagement, and sport-based experiences. Most existing literature offers general insights; more detailed, outcome-specific studies would clarify which strategies best support holistic youth development. This study, while a step forward, focuses on a single organization. Future research should examine meso-level barriers to cultural responsiveness across multiple SBYD programs. Additionally, assessing organizational capacity, including the resources and capital needed for culturally responsive programming, is vital. Understanding both internal and external factors that limit implementation can inform stronger practice.

Finally, future studies should explore how organizations address the cultural needs of their staff and volunteers. Given that many SBYD programs employ community members who share cultural ties with the youth (Wegner et al., 2020), it is essential to examine how organizations support and respond to staff diversity alongside that of participants.

CONCLUSION

This investigation explored cultural responsiveness in an

SBYD program centered around an unconventional sport in a Black community, tennis. From the outset, we affirm cultural responsiveness as essential to SBYD program design and delivery. Our findings demonstrate how Net Worth staff practiced and structured cultural responsiveness in alignment with Simpkins et al.'s (2017) framework, enhancing their ability to meet the diverse cultural needs of participating youth and families (Schulenkorf & Sherry, 2021).

Three key takeaways emerged. First, definitions of success must reflect youths' values, with ongoing input guiding responsive program expectations and structures. Second, cultural responsiveness must move beyond Black and White binary identity categories to embrace the multiplicity and fluidity of sub-cultural groups within the organization. Third, our study addresses a theoretical gap in Simpkins et al.'s (2017) OST framework by proposing a ninth domain: sport-for-development (SFD) factors (Sanders, 2016). This integration extends the original framework by explicitly acknowledging the structural and intentional use of sport as a developmental tool, highlighting how SFD strategies uniquely contribute to culturally responsive practices in OST settings.

By combining Simpkins et al.'s (2007) emphasis on culturally responsive practices with Sanders' (2016) focus on SFD factors, we offer an expanded theoretical model that better captures the realities of cultural responsiveness in SBYD programs. This integrated framework provides a more nuanced lens through which practitioners and researchers can examine the layered interactions between sport structure, youth development, and cultural identity.

Achieving cultural responsiveness is not a one-time goal or a checklist, it is an ongoing, evolving process that requires sustained commitment (Ettekal et al., 2020). Organizations must continuously foster inclusive environments that celebrate cultural diversity (Brownlee & Lee, 2020). Nonetheless, implementation challenges remain. Limited resources, insufficient training, and a lack of culturally relevant materials often hinder effective integration. Overcoming these barriers requires targeted efforts, including comprehensive staff training, dedicated funding, and development of culturally resonant curricula. By addressing these gaps and advancing theoretical models, SBYD programs can better serve diverse youth and realize the full potential of culturally responsive practice.

Table 1.
Practices of Culturally Responsive Program Structure and Staff

Categories	Program structure	Staff
Physical and psychological safety	Have written policies and procedures about inclusivity that specify how the activity is welcoming to all adolescents and families	Be aware of potential culturally based contributors to interpersonal conflict and manage conflict when it occur
	Provide clear structure and procedures for all adolescents to address safety concerns (e.g., racially motivated victimization, bullying) with staff and feeling comfortable in doing so	Promote constructive culturally based conflict resolution among adolescents and staff
	Ensure that policies (e.g., paperwork, English-only policies) do not marginalize groups	Avoid use of language that is discriminatory, teases or makes fun of a particular group, or furthers stereotypes
	Provide an environment that is safe, accessible, and welcoming to adolescents and families of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds	Positively counter practices degrading to particular groups, biases, stereotypes, and discrimination
	Ensure all groups have equal status	Address specific safety concerns of adolescents who are marginalized, victimized, or have other safety concerns (e.g., lack citizenship documentation)
Appropriate structure	Actively seek input from all families and adolescents concerning culturally appropriate structure in the program	Use behavior management strategies based on cultural norms concerning limit setting, rules, and monitoring
	Ensure that all families and adolescents understand the program expectations and procedures	
	Balance autonomy and structure that are consistent with adolescents' cultural norms	Be flexible and adapt structural demands to align with adolescents' cultural background while maintaining overall structural integrity
	Structure groups and relationships in ways that adolescents are accustomed to	
	Adapt rules to recognize adolescents' responsibilities outside of the activity so that a particular group is not unduly penalized	Co-construct rules and decision-making processes, as well as the structure of youth-adult with adolescents
Supportive relationships	Make all communication available in the languages and communication styles (e.g., email, level of eye contact) adolescents and families prefer	Have positive attitudes about all cultural groups
		Focus and build on individuals' assets and strengths
		Foster partnerships with adolescents where both culturally diverse adolescents and staff are viewed as skilled, knowledgeable individuals
	Have relationship-building activities for staff and adolescents to get to know one another, including daily "check-in" times and more formal opportunities	Engage in culturally sensitive interactions with adolescents and families (e.g., sharing life experiences, culturally sensitive displays of emotions
		Mentor adolescents on navigating their multicultural society and daily challenges that occur within and outside of the activity
Opportunities to belong	Provide opportunities, including leadership roles and decision-making opportunities, for all adolescents regardless of background	Foster positive interactions and shared ownership among adolescents from diverse cultural groups
	Make activities a place where adolescents' multiple cultural and social identities are respected	Actively include diverse adolescents in all group-based activities
	Structure activities to foster a sense of community through collaboration toward a common goal rather than competition across groups	Co-construct activity projects and decision between adolescents and staff that places youth voice at the center
Positive social norms	Structure activities to foster a sense of community through collaboration toward a common goal rather than competition across groups	Assist adolescents in bridging cultural differences
		Cultivate a shared activity identity while honoring adolescents' unique identities
	Establish prosocial norms acceptable to all and do not to privilege a particular group	Encourage prosocial norms and behavior among staff and adolescents
	Develop and cultivate program norms to integrate youth voice into the developing the list of norms	Treat all participants, staff, and families with equal respect and consideration
	Have written expectations and discussions with staff, adolescents, and families on positive social norms around cultural differences, diversity, and integration	Promote adolescents' respect and value of diversity
		Have similar expectations for adolescents of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds
Support for efficacy and mattering	Include youth voice in identifying ways to make the program culturally meaningful (e.g., relevant issue they can address, materials, physical space, family events, how they are taught/how the group is structured)	Encourage adolescents to express their needs, interests, and opinions, and support them with respectful feedback
	Provide opportunities to connect programmatic content to their daily lives or the lives of those in their community in a culturally meaningful way so that they better understand the relevance of the activity	Do not avoid or dismiss adolescents' questions about their culture or others' culture
		Support adolescents as they explore their cultural identity and resolve issues concerning culture
Opportunities for skill building	Provide opportunities for skill building (e.g., problem solving) that will help them successfully navigate multiple cultures and intergroup interactions as well as constructively handle bias	Seek teachable moments to discuss with adolescents their culture and others' cultures, teach adolescents strategies to bridge cultural differences in a positive manner, and about cultural capital to succeed in U.S. schools
	Teach adolescents about the history, traditions, and beliefs multiple cultures, including mainstream American culture, in order to enhance cultural knowledge	Be aware of potential cultural differences in valued skills (e.g., assertiveness)
Integration of family, school, and community efforts	Provide opportunities for all parents to be involved, get to know one another, and provide feedback on the program in ways that accommodate parents' schedules and ways of gathering	Know about the diversity and lives of adolescents and families in the area
		Provide outreach to families, especially for those that are "hard to reach."
	Consider adolescents' cultural events and familial obligations in the requirements and schedule	Be sensitive to families' cultural values and work with families to bridge any cultural differences or conflicts with families
	Capitalize on culturally diverse community resources (e.g., Asian American History Museum)	Actively seek out and communicate with all families and other important people (e.g., teachers, religious leaders, promotoras) about adolescents' overall well-being

Note. Simpkins et al. (2017) set of culturally responsive practices for program structure and staff that correspond with eight features of high-quality programs.

Table 2.
Net Worth Staff & Volunteers

Pseudonym	Position	Race	Gender	Age range
Alice	Administrator	White	Female	19-29
Ralph	Administrator	White	Female	30-39
Sweety	Administrator	White	Female	40-49
James	Administrator	White	Male	30-39
John	Administrator	White	Male	40-49
Chris	Staff	Asian	Male	19-29
Gene	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Anaya	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Flower	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Kelly	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Lewis	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Rebecca	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Samantha	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Syd	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Not interviewed	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Not interviewed	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Not interviewed	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Kendall	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Not interviewed	Staff	Black	Female	19-29
Carter	Staff	Black	Male	19-29
Jo	Staff	Black	Male	19-29
Not interviewed	Staff	Latinx	Male	19-29
Morgan	Staff	White	Female	19-29
Susan	Staff	White	Female	19-29
Not interviewed	Staff	White	Female	19-29
Not interviewed	Staff	White	Female	19-29
Not interviewed	Staff	White	Female	19-29
Craig	Staff	White	Male	19-29
Roger	Staff	White	Male	19-29
Greg	Staff	White	Male	19-29
Stephen	Staff	White	Male	19-29
Alex	Volunteer	Asian	Female	19-29
Sean	Volunteer	Asian	Male	19-29
Katelyn	Volunteer	White	Female	19-29
Joshua	Volunteer	White	Male	19-29
Sal	Volunteer	White	Male	19-29
David	Volunteer	White	Male	50-59

Note. Demographic summary of Net Worth administrators, staff, and volunteers by pseudonym, position, race, gender, and age range.

Table 3.

Culturally Responsive Net Worth Practices.

Categories	Program Structure	Staff Practices
Physical & Psychological Safety	So space is incredibly important because people need a place to gather. And so depending on where that place is it can either be a safe place or a not safe place. And so Net Worth is providing first and foremost, a safe place. A place for youth to go to and then also providing additional benefits within that space.	I do think it's part of the culture that an organization can have is that we try to stay away from the word serve or service because it creates a power deficit just implicitly. So we try to focus on partnership ultimately like how we partner with our families.
Appropriate Structure	What we try to do at the beginning of every semester is come together as a group and allow the students to brainstorm what they would like in the semester, whether it's field trip incentives and whatever will help motivate them to do well in their school, in their academics. For the parents we do a lot of needs assessments which just involves me calling the parent, checking in seeing how everything's doing, but also hearing from them, what ways could we step in and assist?	When you just harp on the academics and you don't focus on the connection in the community, right...But if we build the student up social emotionally with activities and connect things that will build connection, then that student in the long run will be more motivated to do well in school because they also hear us saying you do well in school and be motivated in...
Supportive Relationships	Consistency showing up...trying to be consistent about when I show up. Try to recognize students...talking to people that I know that I see consistently. Letting them know that I recognize you, I acknowledge you. Building that relationship with a student, letting them know that I care, I wanna check-in and see how you're doing…that consistency is important to the success.	…and then when they catch an attitude, respecting their space and, and I don't have to step in as the authoritarian every time I could say, Hey, let's just get you a break. I don't have to, Hey, you need to listen to me cuz they don't know me. I have to gain their respect before I just expect it. So I just try to get to know them. I don't pretend to know them before they give me that end.
Opportunities to Belong	So we do give our students a voice with things. With the social justice and racial justice topics, we were doing little activities with that, we would ask the students one, if it was something they were interested in before we started it and if they said, yes, and then we would pull up like a couple lessons a day and let them pick one. So it might not be like great opportunities, but we still are trying to find opportunities mostly centered around, you have two options of what activity we're to do today.	Some of the students have problems with each other, so it the inclusivity. I think that makes it harder for them to get included because of the issues that they do have with each other. But [Executive Director] does a great job at pulling them aside and having that conversation with them to try to bridge that gap that's happening or try to understand what caused that situation and how to make it better.
Positive Social Norms	So we need better policies that probably outline. But again, as we grow, you don't know what you don't know, and you don't know what you need until you get to that time period where. I mean, eight years ago, we didn't have any policies. Right now we have hundreds of pages of policies, right. Each step along the way, we just realize, oh we need a policy for that. We need a policy for that. But we don't know until a conflict gets brought to our desk or until you go through the conflict or the situation.	With the kids, I just remember when they first heard me speak Haitian Creole, they're like, why are you talking to your people like that? Like who are you talking to? I'm speaking with my parents and, why are you talking to them like that? And well this is Haitian Creole. I speak two languages. And they said that Black people can't speak two languages. So it's been a lot of like deconstructing their ideas.
Support for Efficacy & Mattering	We're at the point now where we have 11 or 12th graders who have been in this program since their sixth-grade year. I think that those two things can be combined. The self-efficacy and the community where they are empowered to build their own community. Where they live and work together for so long that kids that wanted to kill each other, and still do from time to time, now have built…they've built like a thriving space for each other. Net Worth has supported that growth in a lot of different ways. I think it's through deliberate activities and field trips and trying to instill values.	…hearing from both sides, reinforces that their voice matters, their feelings matter. And that they are able to express themselves in a space that's created to bring resolution. It is also important to validate feelings. If a student is angry, it's really important to let them know it's okay to be angry. It's okay to be upset. It's okay to cry, if you wanna cry it out. I think a lot of our kids are in situations where it's like, oh, why are you? Like people may question their feelings. Like, why are you upset? Why are you angry? Making it seem like it's a bad thing that I'm reacting this way.
Opportunities for Skill Building	Almost all our students are African American so we definitely focused a lot on that. We have Black history month walls…We've had African American presence in baseball, arts and culture basketball, all these different fields. So that was one thing that we did. And then we do a lot like that. We're touring the what's it called Institute of Black culture at [college] so we're taking 'em to go do that. So we try to make 'em proud of their culture for sure. And that makes 'em feel good to be here and to be around people that really support them and support their whole culture.	They teach some good things. It's just the execution...Sometimes the kids don't understand the importance of what they're listening for. And if it goes over their head, I mean, we were kids, you shut down. If it doesn't apply to you in two seconds, you shut down...Unfortunately, that's the attitude a long time and that's the attitude we used to have…let's give it to them in a way that they can fully take it in and feel a part of it and not feel like it's just being given to them on a blank sheet of paper, then it'll factor more into their lives.
Integration of Family, School, & Community Efforts	We do parent engagement, we have a parent board, we have a parent committee. But parents don't wanna meet. We work in under-resourced communities. Parents are often busy and under a lot of stresses, outside of any kind of extra BS we're trying to put on top of them as an after-school program. Which is only one small part of their life.	I think at least the Executive Director, maybe some of the others involved go to school, board meetings and advocate for educational equity...I'm glad they're advocating for the students on a higher level. There was one time when they got the students together, do some volunteering to like clean up or paint some house in the [name] neighborhood. And so I really appreciate the fact that Net Worth is involved in other ways in the community as well.

Note. Culturally responsive practices at Net Worth are organized into eight categories, with illustrative quotes for program structure and staff practices.

Table 4.
Sport for Development Factors.

Categories	Data quote
Type of sport played	They come in and it is like a formal tennis practice. They run through drills with the students. They teach them how to play properly, the roles of tennis. And so that would be probably our actual sport curriculum and it's only one day a week though. And then for the rest of the week, it's just like open recreation where student can play basketball, they can do whatever they want.
Orientations and actions of peers, parents, coaches, and administrators	Sport is a very small part of our program. There is tennis. They have to play tennis once a week. And even then, that doesn't always happen <laugh> so we try our best because that's like teaching life skills, et cetera, or et cetera.
	Sports-based development it's, how can we take what happens in sport and make it transferable to youth and useful in life. I don't care if any of the kids are good at tennis. Everyone in this program knows I'm not about tennis.
	They'll just mess around cause they might not really want to learn tennis. They just might be there just because they have to play tennis. And I know that that's part of the Net Worth program and I get that not everyone can love tennis that much, but I think that's one of the main reasons why some of the times they might not want to be there to learn tennis.
	Doing afterschool tennis with some few kids…isn't enough. These kids need more, they need help with tutoring, life lessons, just kind of to steer them in the right direction.
	We coddle them, and I think we need to push academics just a little more. These grades are harsh…We need to push academics as much as we would sports and tennis.
	I know [the Executive Director]…he said, the number one thing is don't lecture the kids. His idea was they're not gonna become the next Serena Williams. That's not why they're here. They're here to hit some balls. They're here to have some fun.
	Although it's primarily a tennis-based organization, they don't discriminate against anybody. You don't have to have athletic skills necessarily. That's not what it's about…They're open to anybody. It's not like some club of super athletes…any students are welcome.
Norms, class, and culture associated with specific sports or experiences	Why bring this predominantly White sport into a predominantly Black neighborhood is because there's also a rich history of Black tennis, and why not, a sport is not defined by race either.
	As far as how tennis has grown to be a part of this organization over the years, we have become more culturally aware and as we have educated ourselves, I have started to view tennis differently. I have started to view it as a way to break down barriers and a way to break down stereotypes and a way to break down preconceived notions...it's uniquely positioned to be used as a platform in communities where it's not stereotypically taught or part of the culture.
	Most tennis players have money and they can, because tennis is expensive. You're either you gotta pay 60 bucks an hour to go learn from somebody. They've gotta make money in their profession of coaching and stuff like that. But then that leaves out so many people. So most people don't even get involved in tennis to learn that it's a great sport.
	…so there's way more barriers than just cost, right. There's stereotypes. And there's, I don't know if I belong in a place like that. That has been expressed to me in many different ways, shapes, and direct communication.
Social characteristics of sport participants	That is where our Executive Director, he used to be a tennis pro. So he does have actual stations set up. He has actual volunteers that are good at tennis, played tennis. They know what they're talking about.
	I did play tennis all throughout my childhood, but I'm like too competitive, so I never joined any teams or anything.
	My parents really loved tennis. I never did but I was forced to play as a child. I'm glad I know how to play, but like it's not my sport. I didn't really like it, I'm not very competitive.
	Joined because of a friend who told me about it and also, club tennis. They advocate their members to try and get involved in Net Worth, a little bit more. And club tennis has always had a certain kind of partnership with Net Worth.
Material and cultural contexts under which participation occurs	It's kinda hard sometimes to get a student who went to school and did everything at school, and who knows if they're going through something at home, but then try to force them out there at tennis courts.
	Kids having an attitude, not wanting to do anything, come complaining. It's too hot. It's too cold.
	A bad day in tennis is nobody is trying to dress up. I'm bribing kids and they're still not listening…a lot of them don't like tennis and it's awful trying to get them to play tennis. They have an attitude and they're crying, or they make complete excuses that their stomach hurt when they were just chugging down four bottles of Gatorade and five bags of hot chips.
	A successful day in playing tennis is they actually brought their clothes and if they didn't bring their clothes, they will have the clothes provided to them. They will have their rackets, know where their rackets are.
	The successful days…is them being involved and them actually like being competitive and wanting to learn. If I'm trying to stop a game and they're like, no, let's keep going, that's a successful day for me.
	A lot of kids don't like doing serves, a lot of kids can't do backhands. They're still learning how to do backhands. They don't get that one-on-one help that we used to provide. So, they get more stressed out when its drill days compared to when it's game days.
	They could work in another day of tennis if they could figure that out… for the days of tennis they do the students get more and more engaged. The ones who don't, they're just very discouraged cause they're not good.
Social relationships formed through sport participation	They've done studies and I've heard that, what really makes a difference for somebody that may be facing challenge or adversity or, just growing up. What's important for a youth to develop well, especially those that may be considered at risk or maybe those that are living in poverty. And I think the common denominator is a relationship with the one caring adult. There needs to be a relationship. That is positive. That a young person can look up to and to rely on. And I think that Net Worth provides those caring relationships and has provided those caring relationships well. We do it in the context of sport and more specifically tennis.
	Now it's somewhat they don't get out on the tennis courts enough and they don't have enough time to learn step by step. The improvement of the moves and how the moves can be translated to real life. Like I remember one day we were talking about how they could have leadership skills just by running a drill on the court one day…And I feel like the more they get out there and the more they understand the better things get.
Meanings given to sport and experiences	She says she don't wanna be there, but you see the enjoyment that's in her eyes. So, I feel like tennis gives them something to be motivated towards. Cause it's a fun activity that they're doing with people that they love. And it's something that just gets their mind off the world.
	At least you say you tried rather than not trying at all because you allowed fear to take over. And I think that's what the message of tennis sent to the kids.
	Encouraging one another…So, when the kids are trying, when they're persevering through a certain activity or skill they're trying to improve on when the coaches are out there saying…Those are definitely in my opinion, the successful days."

Note. Sport for development factors at Net Worth are organized into seven categories with illustrative quotes, including tennis participation and its social, cultural, and emotional impacts.

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