

## Women 2021 Student Essay Contest

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The daily realities of racism and structural oppression in the lives of urban Black teens create an ill-fated, normative experience that can forever influence their adolescent development. Other chronic stresses, such as multi-generational poverty in Black families and communities, have the potential to fertilize additional experiences of trauma, such as sexual and mental abuse, neglect, family dysfunction, and divorce. Thus, the risk pathologies and complications that arise because of institutional, societal, and historical expressions of anti-Blackness tend to become a perpetually unhealed wound that is inextricably entangled with the average Black teen's sense of self. These children become trapped within deeply entrenched systems designed to work against them, and then they are blamed for their inability to succeed.

As a co-founder of **I Am MORE** (Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday), a culturally specific, social-emotional-focused programming for youth of color, we have been deeply connected to creating space for young adults amidst the events of 2020. This program provides Black youth with an opportunity to see, name, reflect upon and challenge racial oppression as a structural poison, as opposed to an individual's flaw, and then heal from it from the inside out. I Am MORE's programming puts young people through a three-step process that helps them unearth the potential already buried within them and then provides youth of color with opportunities to be paid to lead, facilitate and engage in social justice actions that serve their community and other youth of color. Its theory of change: *When I am grounded in my power, I*

*Empower:* The main solution to these situations is to internalize the process of change. While it is true that the Government bodies often only allow "solutions" which do not challenge their power, in I Am More, based on our research, we have found the following solutions as listed below to be more efficient in helping the Black Youths to thrive in these trying times, these processes are:

### **Raising Radical Hope**

Radical hope is far beyond wishful thinking. It is a future-oriented, goal-setting mindset in the face of oppression that “allows for a sense of agency to change things for the greater good -- a belief that one can fight for justice and that the fight will not be futile” (French et al., 2019, p. 13). According to Mosley et al. (2019), radical hope “fueled abolitionist, civil rights, and radical, ethnic, and women’s social movements” (p. 3), and requires a) an understanding of how to resist historical oppression; b) ancestral pride; and c) a social justice mindset (2019, p. 1).

### **Creating Radical Healing**

Radical healing is a liberatory framework that increases Black youths’ capacity to resist their own oppression (Theriault, 2019). French et al. (2019) contend radical healing is grounded in “(a) collectivism, (b) critical consciousness, (c) radical hope, (d) strength and resistance, and (e) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge,” characteristics of ubuntu that lead to self-actualization. Radical healing results in building the capacity of Black youth to unfetter themselves - psychologically and emotionally - from the definitions, limitations, and psychological harm resulting from America’s colonizing-based standards and assumptions. As noted by DeGruy (2005), “The first step to healing is to know what is in need of healing” (p.211), which is Black children’s numb acceptance of a “slow and stunted growth. Three steps forward, two steps back” (p.157).

## **Inspiring Black Joy**

Centering Black joy is particularly essential for Black people as it serves as a practice of personalized self-care, a transactional opportunity to bring happiness to oneself while welcoming those witnessing one's smile, laughter, or moment of peace to join in this act of defiant resistance to the wearisome reality of being Black in America. Johnson (2015) says Black joy provides mental space to “stretch our imaginations beyond what we previously thought possible and allows us to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives” (p. 180).

## **Institutionalizing Empowered Resilience**

Within the last 30 years, resilience has emerged in research as a promising remedy to trauma (Benard, 2004). The word resilience originates from the Latin word *resilire*, which means to regain one's well-being in spite of adversity (2004). Eventually, decades of scholarly research produced a resiliency theory, which is the “motivational force within everyone that drives them to pursue wisdom, self-actualization, and altruism and to be in harmony with a spiritual source of strength” (Richardson, 2002, p. 309). Resiliency is now considered a transcending intervention positively associated with physical health (Black & Forf-Gilboe, 2004), emotional health (Rew et al., 2001), and academic achievement (Kumi-Yeboah, 2016).

## **Three Grounding Theories**

I Am MORE's programming is grounded in three strategies that are interwoven throughout its pedagogical structure: *critical consciousness, social justice action, and art and creativity*.

- **Rational-cultural theory** is a culturally responsive framework that acknowledges that we find meaning and belonging when we are engaged in interdependence, and, conversely, feeling of shame and unworthiness when we cannot wholly be ourselves without judgment or critique (Frey,2012; Haskins & Appling, 2015; Lenz 2014) This theory bolsters I Am MORE’s intention to provide culturally nurturing, social-emotional skill building while teaching Black adolescents how to navigate beyond political, economic and social systems designed to oppress them (Ginwright And Cammarota, 2002).
- **Critical youth empowerment (CYE)** is an emerging theory that leans on individual and collective efforts (i.e., family, organization, and community) to build the capacity of youth to gain control over the quality of their lives (Jennings et al., 2006). Adults are still needed, but primarily to create a supportive, shared-power environment that helps youth energy in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, which, ultimately, will lead to youth engaging in social action and community organization (2006) Affirming students’ strength, helping them build community with their peers, and helping them attach meaning to their experiences increases their capacity to learn and grow from traumatic events (Bogar & Hulse-Killacky, 2006).
- **Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit)** is a more specific structure of addressing anti-Black racism than critical race theory (CTY). it “confronts the specificity of anti-blackness as a social construct and embodies lived experience of social suffering and resistance” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 417). Its encouragement of storytelling and counter-storytelling, and naming and challenging of anti-Blackness, provides “the necessary context for understanding, feeling and interpreting” the impact of racial oppression as endemic

(Ladson Billings, 1998, p. 14). BlackCrit justifies the centering of Black voices, giving teenagers opportunities to transcend trauma by reframing their traumatic experiences as a gift of wisdom and inspiration that others can learn from them and be inspired to take social action.

## **Conclusion**

The need to create a long-term structural change that shows an imaginative justice perspective regarding these issues cannot be overemphasized. Especially for the Black Youths which are emerging leaders and full of potentials. This process of structural change has long been viewed as an institutional issue, however, only a handful of perspectives have been an internalizing solution.

In I Am More, we are of the opinion that if these situations and issues are tackled from these three (3) key internalization perspectives for long-term sustainable solution:

1. **Inside -Out.** Where Black Youths can have space to reframe their life experiences and discover their unique sense of purpose so that they can begin to walk through the world not as victims, but as heroes of their own reimagined story.
2. **Outside-Up.** This involves Black youths researching and analyzing racial justice issues in their community and investing their wisdom into creating meaningful awareness of social justice issues.
3. **Up & Beyond.** To create a space for Black Youths to express their arts and creativity to share inspiring personal stories about what they have learned about hope, healing, belonging, and social-justice-oriented community building.

With this academic scholarship, I will be able to pay for my tuition and other school-related fees. Currently, I am not being sponsored by parents or guardians, hence I cater for my own expenses and struggle daily for my own income. The majority of my expenses are financed from the projects that I partake in my Co-Founded organization, I Am More, but these are not enough to cover all my academic expenses as the organization is a Not-for-Profit. This scholarship will, in a magnanimous way, grant me some relief on my education and academic bills.