

# Playing with Anger & Aggression in Youth (PLAAY)

## Culturally Responsive Racial Literacy Interventions for Black Youth

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**“The Lion’s Story will Never Be Known As  
Long as the Hunter is the One to Tell It”**

African proverb



## Outline

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Racial Stress Undermines Health  
and Productivity

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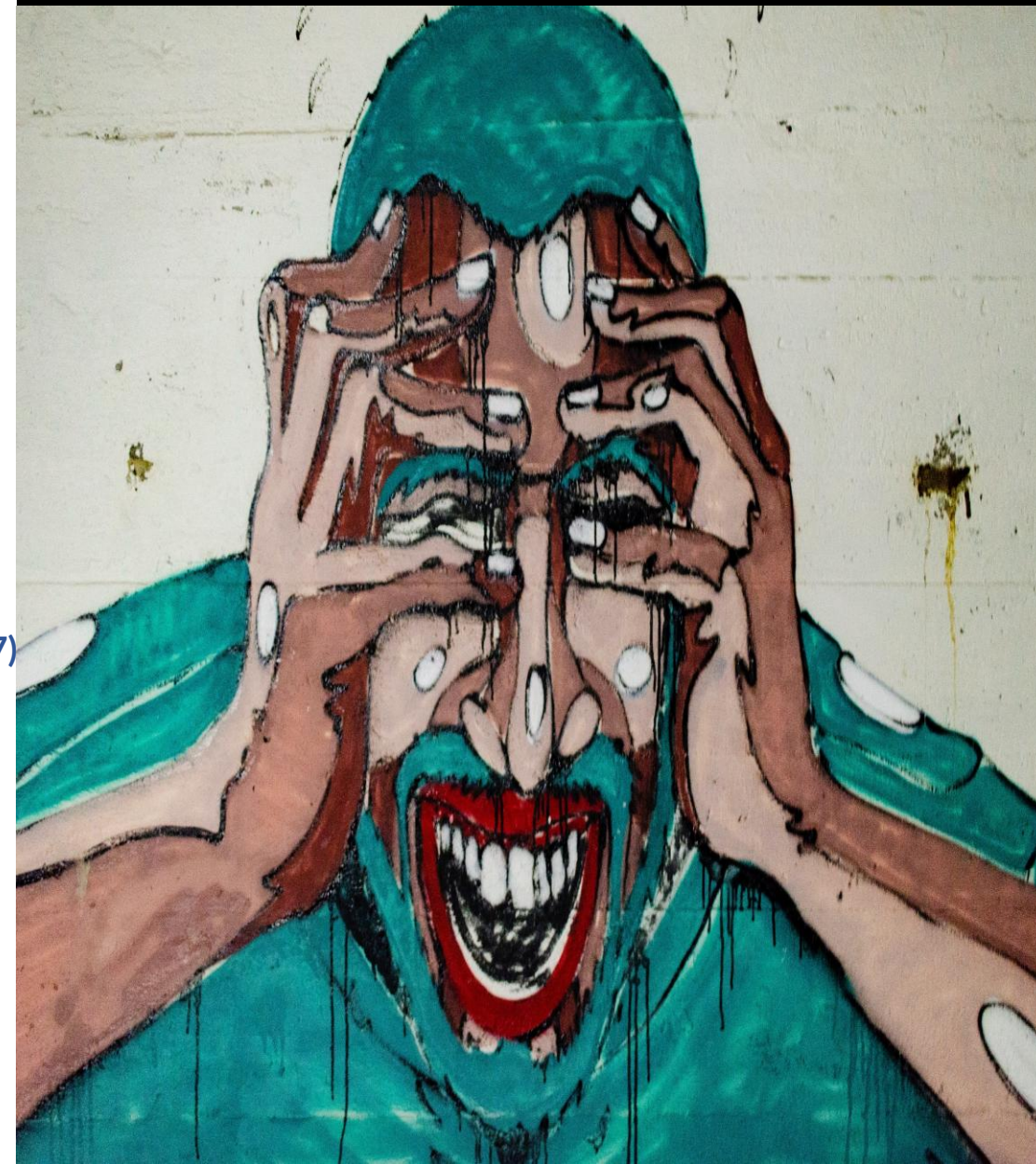
Racial Socialization/Literacy  
Buffers Hate

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How PLAAY Seeks to Restrain  
Retaliation via Mindfulness,  
Physical Activity, & Storytelling

# Hate Stress & Trauma Is Harmful to Health of POC

- A Racing Mind (Steele, 2011 )
- **Racial Battle Fatigue** (Smith et al, 2020)
- Ruminations (Utsey et al., 2013; Hicken et al., 2019)
- Presumed Dangerous (Trawalter et al, 2008; Wilson et al, 2017)
- C-Adverse CE (Bernard et al., 2021)
- **Weathering** & John Henryism (James, 2016)
- Racial Disc→Depression (Seaton & Lida, 2026)
- Cardiovascular Disease (Everson-Rose et al., 2015)
- Breast Cancer in Black Women (Taylor et al, 2007)
- **Poor Sleep Quality** in Teens (Ten Brink, et al., 2018)



# “Black boys are viewed as older and less innocent at 10 years old than white boys”

*Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta & DiTomasso (2014)*

- Black boys seen as **less “childlike”** than White peers
- Participants (police & white females) **projected Black boys to be 4½ yrs older than white boys**
- **Characteristics of childhood are applied less** when thinking about Black boys relative to White boys
- **Dehumanization** worse where stereotypes are used
  - “Black/Ape” predicted racial disparities in police violence toward children



# Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood

Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez, 2018

**“Adultification”**  
→ long-term  
outcomes



**GOC (5-14 yrs)**  
more likely to  
be suspended,  
arrested from  
school



**Seen as adult-like**

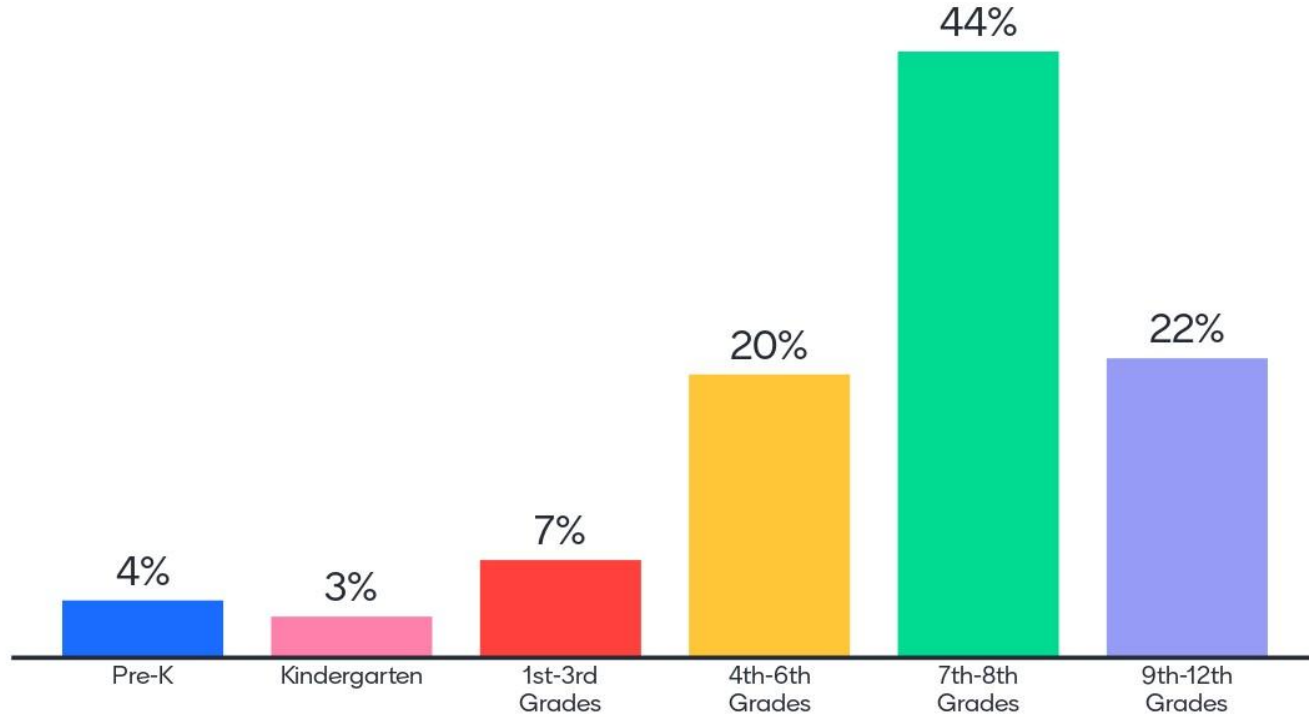
- more familiar with adult topics & sex
- need less protection, nurturance, support



**Which grade do you think  
students of all racial groups are  
expelled the most?**

**Put your response in the CHAT**

# Which grade do you think students of all racial groups are expelled the most?



# Pre-K Left Behind – Expulsion Rates in State Pre-K Systems

*Gilliam, 2005*

- Expulsion is “complete & permanent removal of a student from an entire education system”
- **3,898 PreK classrooms** (81% response rate)-52 state-funded PreK systems
- 10.4% of PreK teachers expelled at least 1 preschooler in past 12 months
- 19.9% of those teachers reported expelling more than one.
- **Rate is 3.2 times the rate for K-12 students**

# Black Pre-K Left Behind by Stereotype Fears

*Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016*

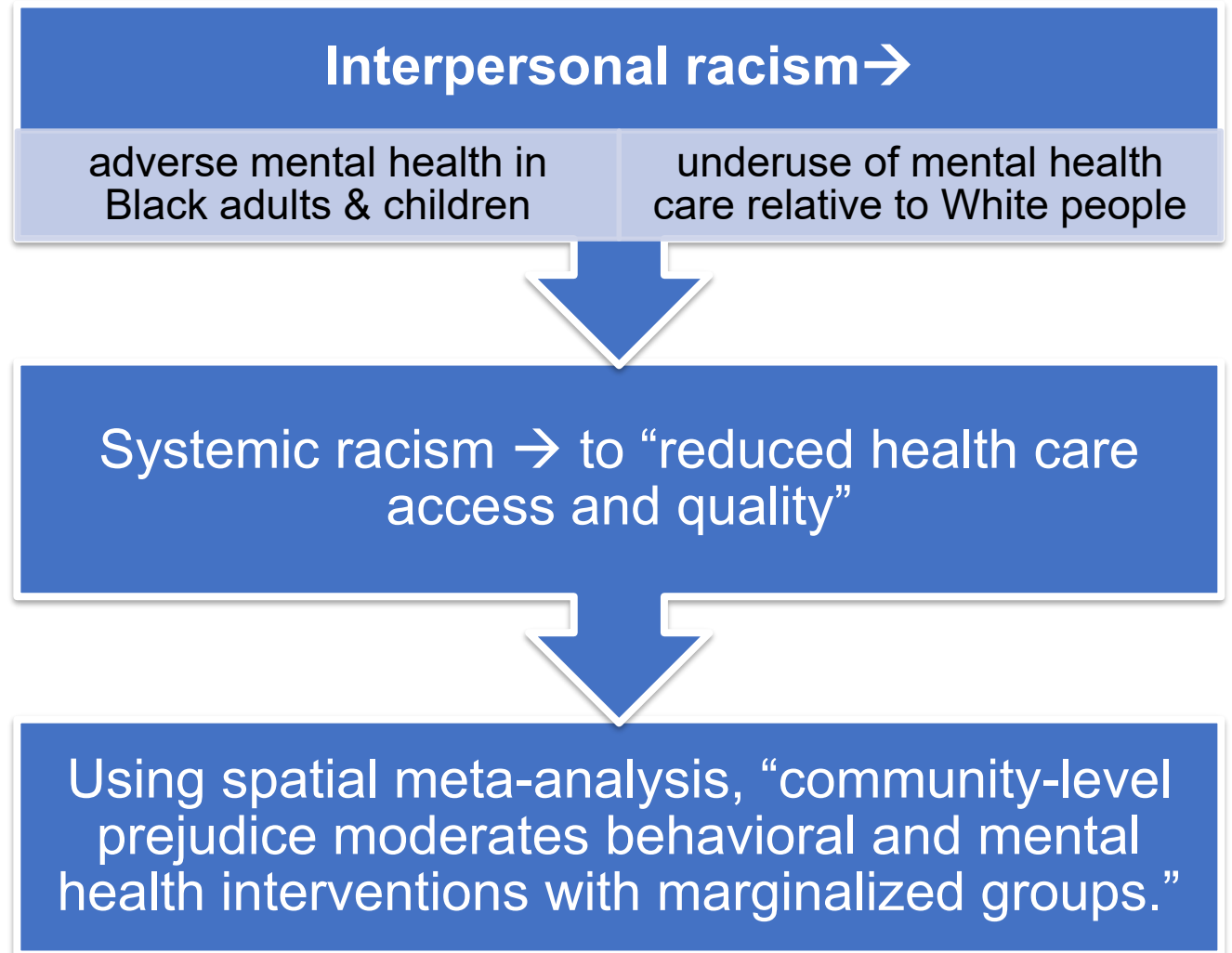
- **African American preschoolers are 2x likely to be expelled as white or Latino children and 5x as Asian Americans** (Dobbs, 2005; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016)
- disproportionate and punitive by authority figures -  
**“egregious overreactions driven by their biased expectations and fears of these youth”**
- Behavioral consultant in room reduces the disparity

Based on its database—which currently documents [more than 3,600 exonerations](#) since 1989—the National Registry of Exonerations [found](#):

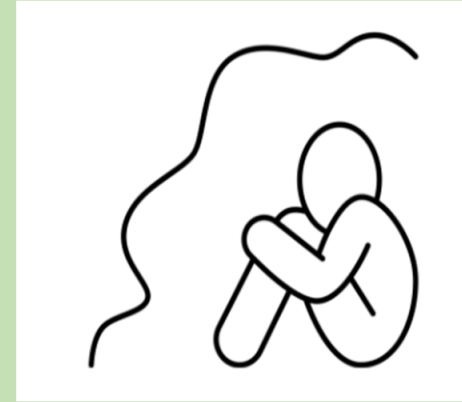
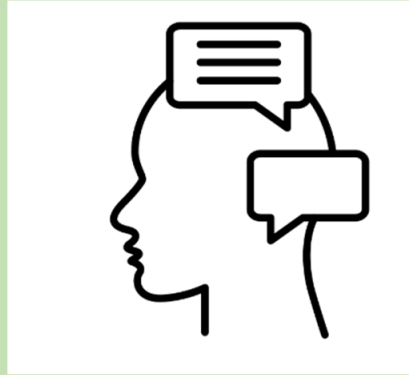
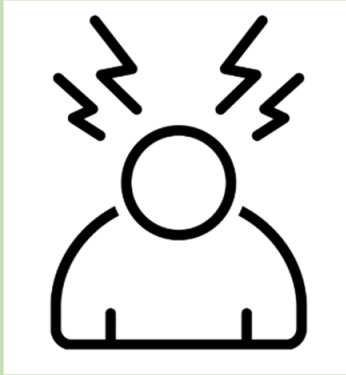
- **7x**
- **Black Americans are 7 times more likely than white Americans to be falsely convicted of serious crimes**
- **7.5x**
- **Black Americans are 7.5 times more likely than white Americans to be falsely convicted of murder**
- **19x**
- **Black Americans are 19 times more likely than white Americans to be wrongly convicted of a drug crime**
- **Across all crime categories, researchers found that **Black people who are wrongly convicted of a crime are likely to spend much longer periods of time in unjust incarceration than white people who were innocent****
- **Equal Justice Initiative**

# Psychotherapies are Less Effective in Communities with Greater Anti-Black Racism (Price et al., 2022)

Climate, Context,  
and Activism  
Matter



# HOW **HATE** DRAINS RESILIENCE



**Negative  
Self-Talk**



**Vigilance**



**Isolation**



**How  
Structural  
Racism  
“Gets  
Under the  
Skin”**

**Accelerated brain  
aging**

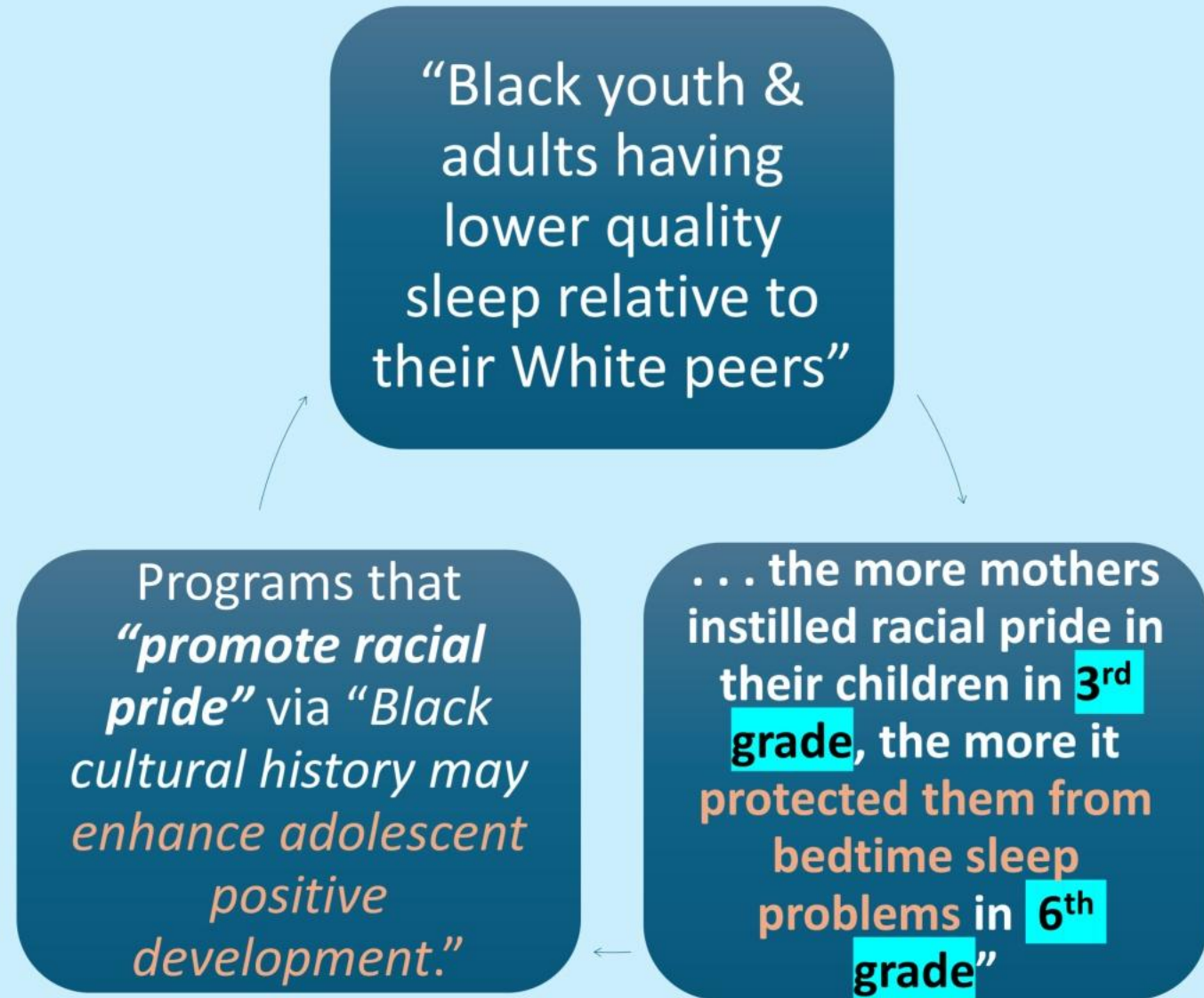
**Dysregulation of the  
HPA axis**

**Allostatic Load**



# Parent Racial Socialization During Childhood Prevents Bedtime Sleep Problems

Conway, Cain, et al., 2021



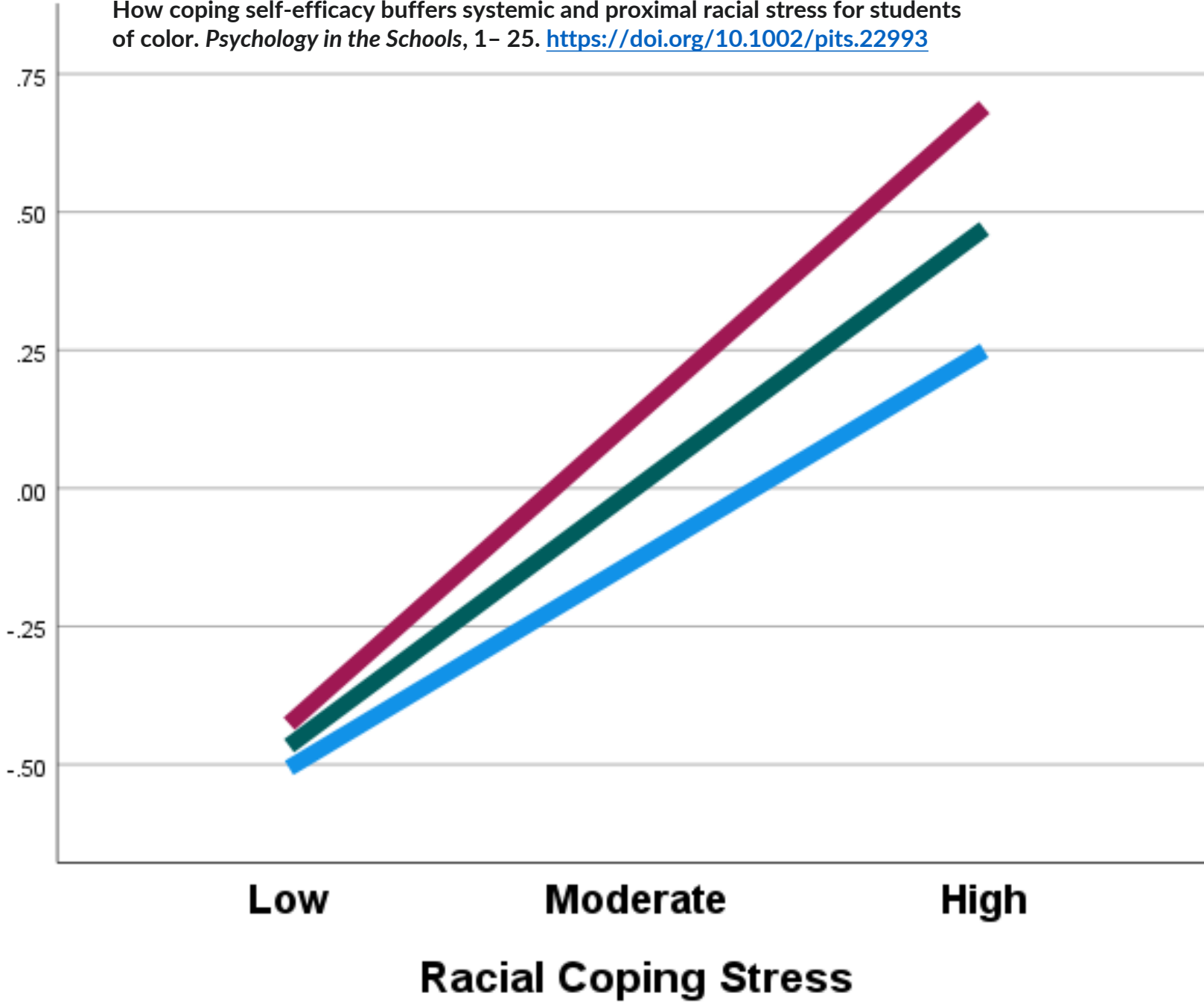
# Proximal Racial Stress & Belonging in Predominantly White Independent Schools (PWIS)

Collins, J. A. & Stevenson, H. C. (2023). Racial climate reform in independent schools: How coping self-efficacy buffers systemic and proximal racial stress for students of color. *Psychology in the Schools*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22993>



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**Feel My School Is Threatening**



**Racial Coping Self-Efficacy**

**High**

**Moderate**

**Low**

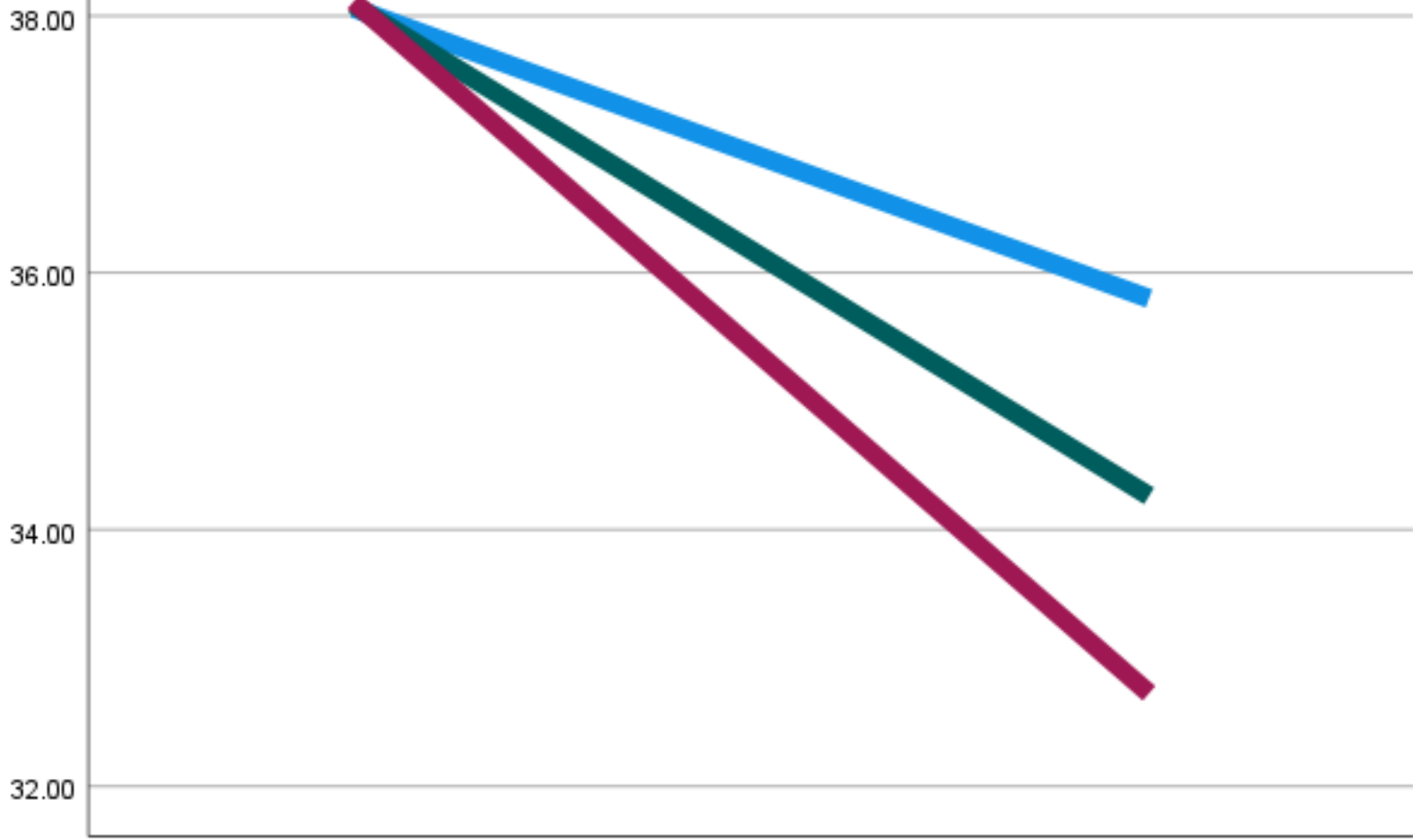
**Racial Coping Confidence Buffers Racial Stress & Threat in PWIS Schools  
N=450**

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**School Belonging**

**Racial Coping Self-Efficacy**

- High**
- Mod**
- Low**



**Low**

**Moderate**

**High**

**Racial Coping Stress**

**Racial Coping Confidence Buffers School Belonging Decline in PWIS Schools N=450**

# Racial Encounter Coping Appraisal and Socialization Theory (RECAST)

Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Stevenson, 2014

## Why Racial Socialization is Helpful

- improves regulation of racial stress, builds racial coping self-efficacy

## Why Racial Socialization is Not Enough

- Caregivers' racial trauma undermines "The Talk" - **Competency Matters**

***“You can discover more in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.”***

**Plato**

# PLAAY - Preventing Long-term Anger and Aggression in Youth

## TEAM – Teaching Empowerment during Athletic Movement

- Intervening with Emotion during Basketball Play

## CPR- Cultural Pride Reinforcement

- Cultural Socialization Curriculum via Group Therapy



# Why Play?



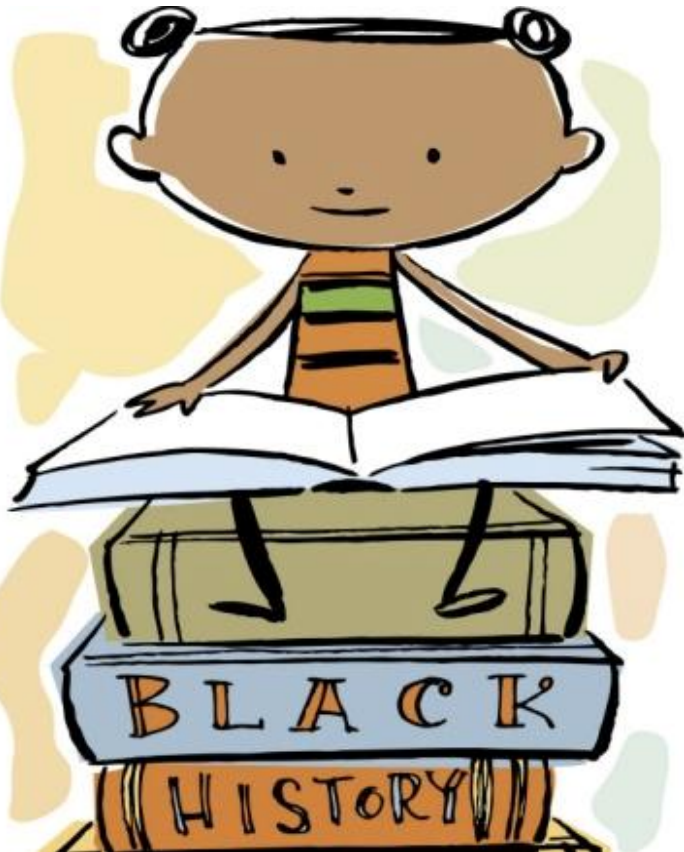
- Play is the way kids learn
- Play is like work for kids
- Play develops:
  - social problem solving
  - imagination - important for thinking and understanding abstract concepts
  - stress reduction skills
- Youth have to focus differently during physical activity vs therapy
- **Play as the medium of expression**
  - **We can learn how children think and feel through their movements- w/o saying a word**
  - **Black psychology giant- Wade Boykin- “verve, communalism, etc”**

(Stevenson, 2020)



# CPR Activities

## Cultural Pride Reinforcement



- Teach Black history, psychology, humanity affirmation via racial socialization & literacy
- Practice cognitive-behavioral & retaliation restraint skills;
- Rehearse CLCBE mindfulness for hate/conflict encounters during
  - physical activity (basketball); **racial storytelling, journaling, debating, & role-playing**
- PLAAY consists of a **20-session, 10-week psycho-educational racial literacy curriculum** designed to fit within in-school, after-school, and community recreation contexts.
- 2 trainers for every 8 youth

# Why Basketball?



- If crisis is opportunity, PLAY is healing
  - ❖ Emotions occur during competitive and frustrating play, but can be influenced before, during, and after conflicts
  - ❖ Pro-social behavior & frustration tolerance in “play” atmosphere
  - ❖ Establish purpose (affection, protection, & correction) during spontaneous moments
  - ❖ Limits testing increases competence, builds trust and decreases noncompliance
  - ❖ Basketball is a stage for cultural and identity expression

# Why Racial/Identity-Based Storytelling?

*It Helps Our Brains Search for Hope Despite the Trauma*

## Both-And:

- Scary & Safe
- Hero and Villain

Neural Coupling

Better Memory  
Storage & Recall

Confronting Hate

Fosters Empathy

Brings threat  
level down

# PLAAY Assumptions

- Physical activity heals in multiple systems (body, mind, emotions)

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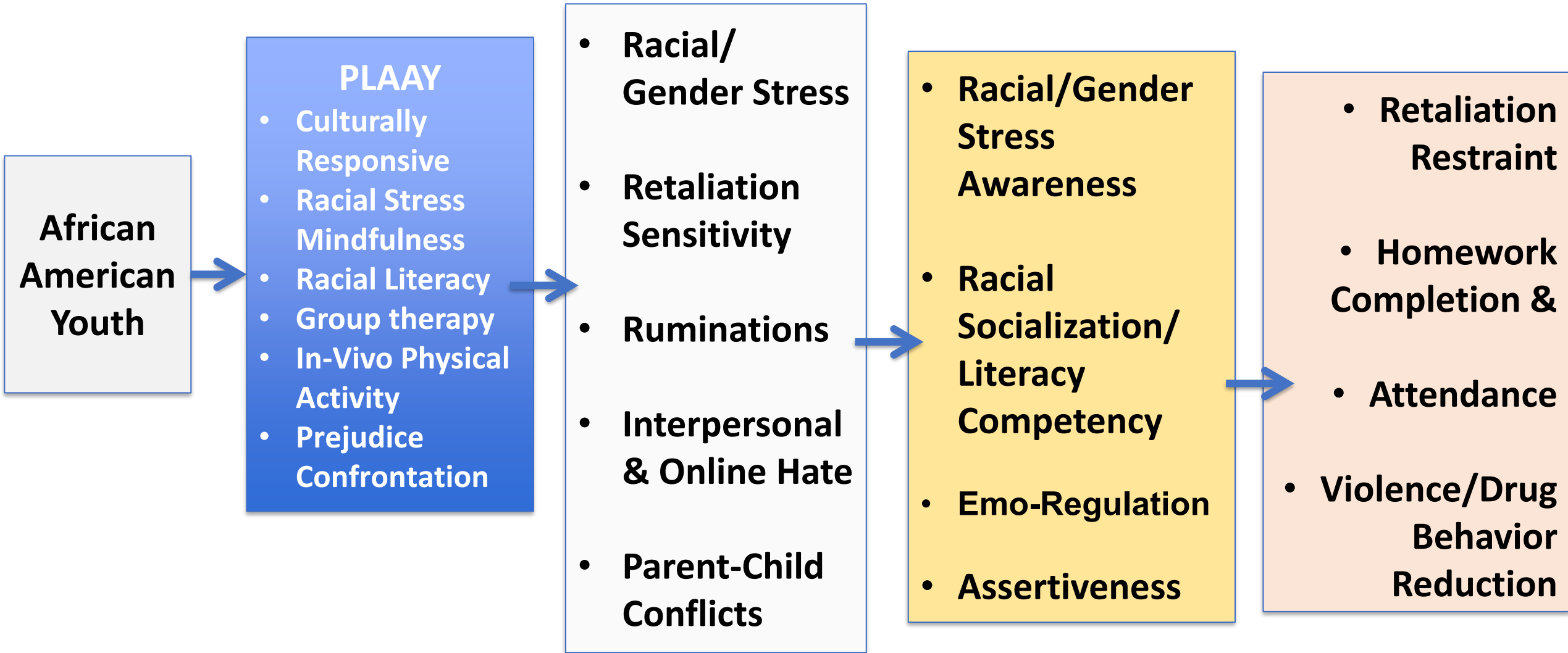
  - Stress from racial/gender conflicts disrupts daily functioning
  - 3 big challenges in *face-to-face conflicts*
    - Mismanaging stress
    - Making healthy decisions quickly
    - Asserting voice
  - Unaddressed stress turns to trauma → disrupts health & relationships
- (Stevenson, 2021)
- Best healing when it becomes muscle memory –that takes practice

# PLAAY Theory of Change and Hypotheses

## RECAST Theory

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- Youth can negotiate *in-the-moment* (ITM) conflicts if
  - taught racial socialization and literacy strategies.
- Gendered-Racial socialization prepares youth for hate
- Mindfulness → (See yourself, Be Yourself) → Emo-regulation
- Racial Literacy → more noticing, regulating stress improves decision-making, retaliation restraint, assertiveness
- Buffering Dehumanization and Asserting Humanity through Practice During Conflict



# **PLAAY is a culturally responsive intervention**

- help youth/caregivers *manage stress during face-to-face conflicts*
- Racial Socialization → prepare youth; Racial literacy → skills competency
- teach racial/gender literacy to buffer negative stress of racism/identity/narrative oppressions on youth health and decision
- Use physical activity (basketball) and group therapy to practice
  - **mindfulness, racial literacy, and assertiveness skills**
  - ***storytelling, journaling, debating, and roleplaying***
- improve youth decision-making, attendance, and relationships in schools, families, and neighborhoods

<sup>31</sup> (Stevenson, 2023)

# RESEARCH:

## What we learned from PLAAY?

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(Stevenson, 2003)



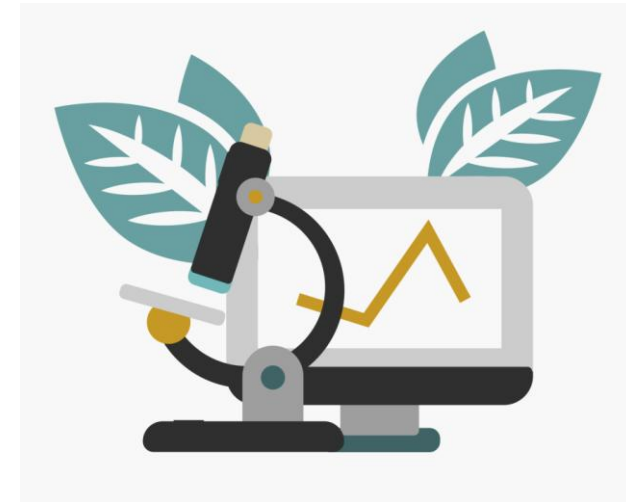
# Method

- 102 boys were randomly assigned to PLAAY and Control groups
- Control group n = 31; PLAAY group n = 46
- Control students received standard programs and resources provided to all students within the discipline school curriculum including remedial academic and counseling services
- The PLAAY condition included cultural socialization and movement intervention components
- Discipline school setting: Serious assault or weapons violation for admission
- Ages range from 10-15, split into two groups (10-13 & 14-18)
- ASCA- Adjustment Scales for Children and Adolescents, (McDermott, 1995)
  - Teacher observations of student adjustment of overactive (Attention-deficit, Oppositional-defiant, Impulsive-aggressive, Provocative-aggressive) and underactive behaviors (Diffident, Avoidant)
- Rejection Sensitivity (Downey et al., 1999)
  - Angry and anxious rejection sensitivity, Angry psychological reactions (Retaliation Cognitions)

## Results, cont.

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- PLAAAY students increased attendance, homework completion rates, and school engagement; Reduced in-school assault rates and referrals to office
- PLAAAY students showed significantly lower **retaliation cognitions** and **psychological reactions** than Control group at Time 2 but showed greater anger reactions than Control group
- No differences were found for rejection sensitive anger or anxiety
- PLAAAY students rated by teachers as having poorer behavioral adjustment showed greater improvement than Control students rated similarly by teachers





# Reading RSE:

- Seeing “racial elephant in the room”
- Seeing “color-blindness”
- Decoding racial/ID scripts & actions
- Noticing impact on self/others
  
- Can't Heal if You Don't Notice Harm





# Recasting Racial Stress

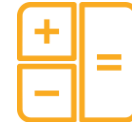
To rewrite or do-over

- Regulating racial stress
  - CLCBE
- Reframing racial threat to stress
  - Impossible → Manageable
- Breathing in hope;
- Exhaling self-doubt



# CLCBE

CLCBE is a mindfulness approach that allows you to calculate, locate, and communicate racial stress (Stevenson, 2014) .



## Calculate

On a scale from 1-10, how intense are my feelings now?



## Locate

Where on my body do I feel the stress?



## Communicate

1. What Self-Talk &
2. Self-Images come to mind?



## Breathe & Exhale

Breathe in slowly.  
Exhale slower.



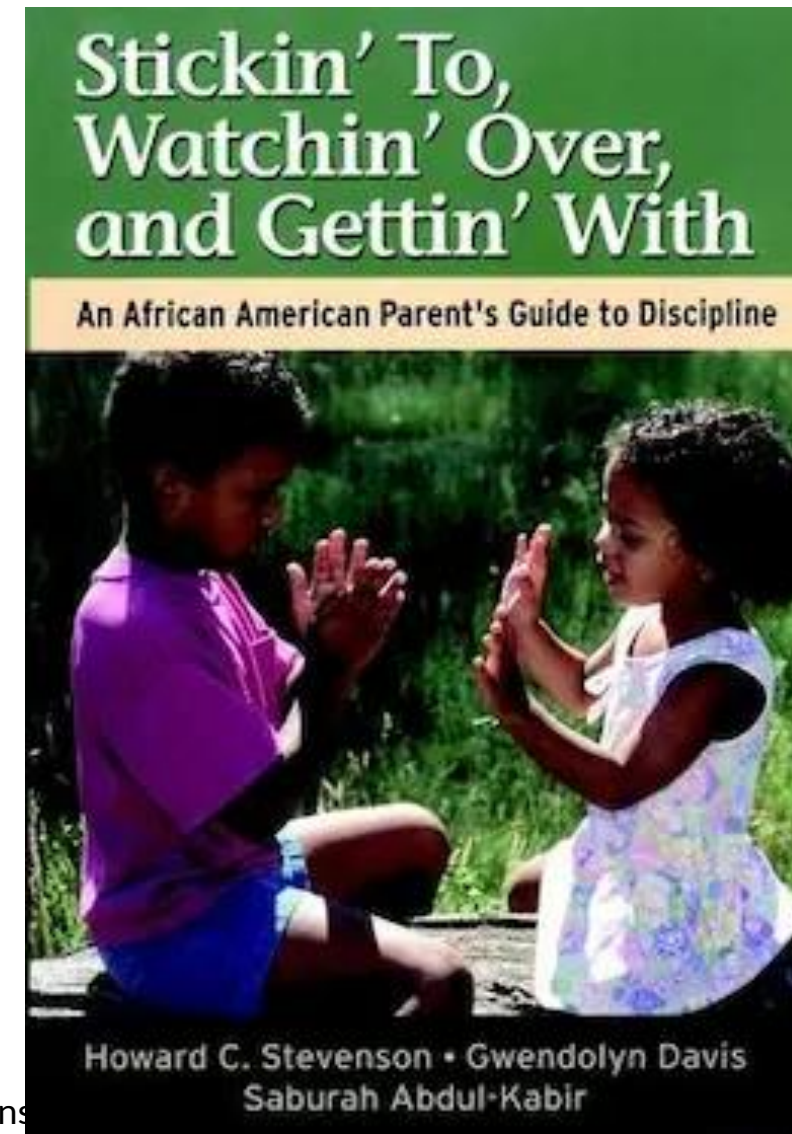
# Resolving RSE

- Engaging not avoiding racial moments
- Negotiating → healthy decisions
- Asserting my voice to confront injustice

## Protection, Affection, Correction Transactions (PACT) (Stevenson et al., 2003)

Can caretakers make a pact to *protect, affirm, and redirect* youth as they cope with stress and trauma?

- **Protection-** Watch Over- Monitor – Look Out For
- **Affection-** Stick To- Empathize With- Affirm – Embrace
- **Correction-** “Get With” – Challenge – Confront – Redirect
- **Physical, Emotional, and Cultural Elements**



(Stevens

# Finding Voice: Power of Confronting Prejudice

(Chaney et al., 2021; Czopp et al., 2006; Dickter et al., 2012; Hyers, 2007; Rattan & Dweck, 2010; Sanchez et al., 2016; Shelton et al., 2006).

- Improves mental well-being via autonomy
- Reduces prejudice ruminations
- Disrupts offenders' future use of stereotypes
  - (sexist, homophobic, racist)

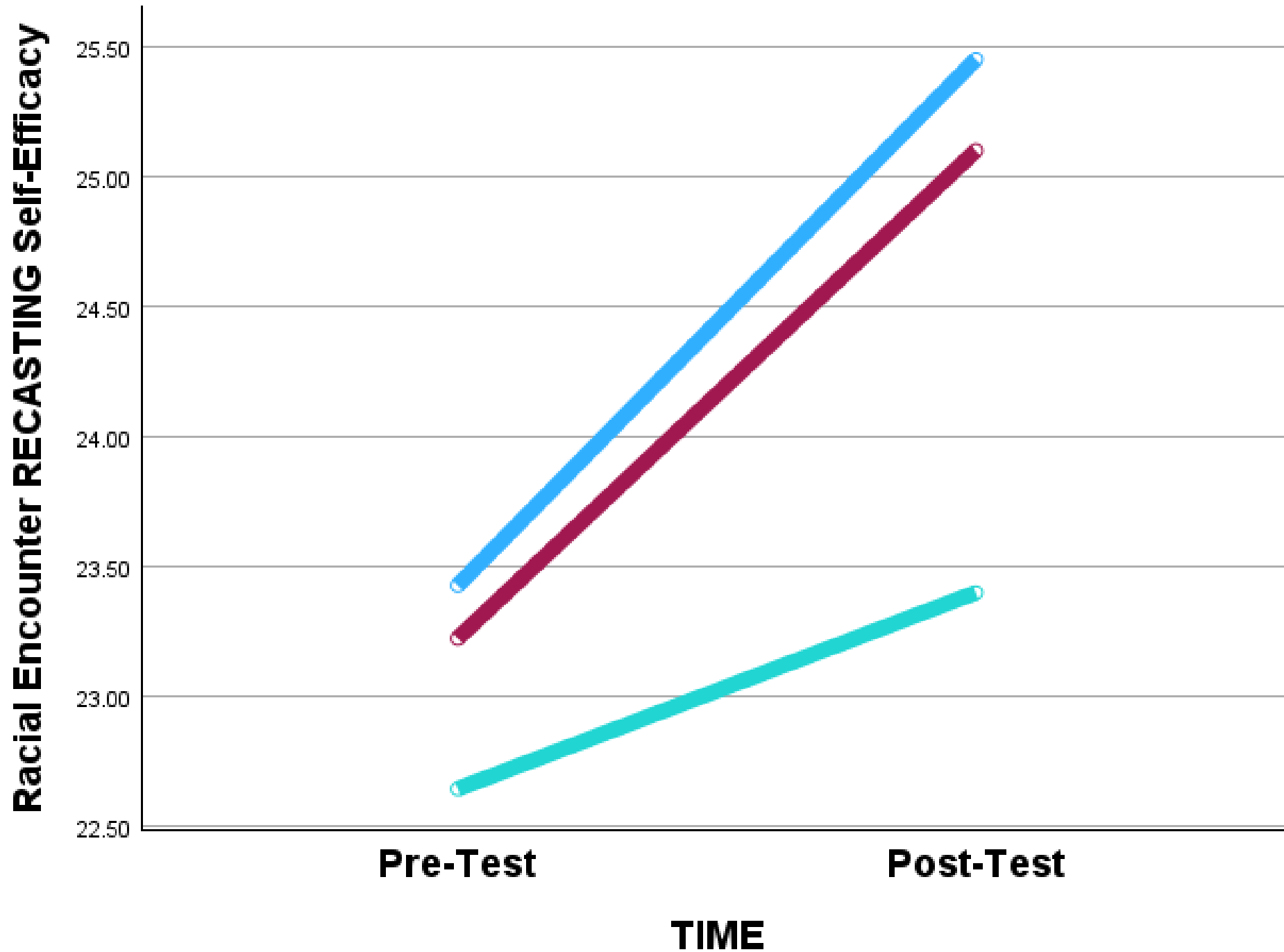
# Healthy Racial Comeback Line Guidelines

(Stevenson, 2014)

- You don't have to say them to the offender
- You must learn to say them to yourself first
- Core to CL- **"I reject your rejection of me"**
- Practice Healthy and UnHealthy Comeback Lines
- Healing Not Harm; **Confrontation not Retaliation;**
  - Dignity not Dehumanization
- Remember, "Don't deliver it without practice"
- Use your style, movement, attitude, rhythm, tone



"Say It Again!"



**RCT Condition**

- Racial Literacy Plus
- Racial Literacy Basic
- Control

Brief Racial Literacy intervention boosts **Racial Coping Recasting Self-Efficacy** for high school students (n=1010)

# REC Racial Literacy Projects

(SAMHSA, 2021;  
Stevenson, 2003; 2014;  
Stevenson et al., 2021;  
Stevenson, Aisenbrey, et al.,  
2024)

- **Can We Talk Project:**
- Prepare Teachers/Students to Resolve School Racial Conflict
  - (Bentley-Edwards, Coleman-King, et al., 2021; Stevenson, et al., 2020)
- **Shape-Up Project:**
- Prepare Barbers/Patrons to Restrain Retaliation & Unsafe Sex
  - (Baker, et al, 2018; Jemmott et al., 2023; Stevenson et al., 2021)
- **PLAAY Project:**
- Prepare Coaches/Youth to Manage Stress during Play/Physical Activity
  - (Thomas et al., 2009; Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Stevenson, 2003; 2014)
- **EMBRace Project:**
- Prepare Families to Build Racial Communication Skills
  - (Anderson, McKinney, & Stevenson, 2019; Anderson et al., 2018a; 2018b)



## **The Lion's Story Village**

- Culturally Responsive Racial Literacy Village-Raising for Communities of Color

## **CROPS: Changing Racial Outcomes in Proximal Spaces**



## Sesame Street Racial Justice Initiative

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/subtopics/dealing-with-racial-hurt/>

## What is Racial Literacy?

<https://sesameworkshop.org/resources/what-is-racial-literacy/>



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