

Use of Rites of Passage Programs to Foster Resilience in African American Students

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Abstract

This provides an overview of the harsh educational experiences of many African American students in our nation's schools and highlights simultaneously the fact that some students are able to demonstrate resiliency to perform at high academic standards despite their circumstances. Implications for school counselors with recommendations for facilitating resiliency among African American students are discussed. The Rites of Passage program is introduced as one method that has effectively demonstrated success in fostering academic excellence among African American students.

Schools in the United States have grown increasingly more diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, and culture (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2000, Education Trust, 2000). Some of the causes attributed to this increased diversity include higher rates of immigration, declining birth rates among Whites, and increasing birth rates within the Latino community (Rosenzweig & Ziv, 1999). Given these demographic shifts, today's classrooms oblige teachers to work more effectively and comfortably with culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Shade, 1995). Needless to say, such a charge should not be limited to teachers. Arguably, other school personnel, such as school counselors, must become culturally competent by developing the requisite awareness, knowledge, and skills to improve educational prospects for children from marginalized groups. When school counselors have an understanding of the cultural and social factors contributing to the challenges that culturally diverse students face as well as a corresponding set of skills within which to effect change, they are better poised to help improve the quality of students' educational experiences, facilitate academic achievement, and promote personal success.

African American Adolescents' Educational Experiences and Resilience

The degree to which all children receive an equitable education in this country continues to spark volatile debate, despite the 1954 landmark decision, *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. Analyses of data collected by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR, 2000) present a disturbing picture of the qualitatively different educational experiences that exist for African American children. In far too many instances, these experiences coincide concomitantly with their racial and ethnic designation. As an example, national assessment data indicate that

African American children, lag behind their White counterparts in math with 35% of White fourth graders scoring at or above proficient levels compared to 5% of African American students in the same grade (No Child Left Behind, 2001). Moreover, low income children and African American male adolescents are over-represented in special education placements, while at the same time, they remain underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented (Patton, 1998; The Civil Rights Project, 2002; USDOE, OSEP, DANS, 2001).

To compound matters, African American adolescents are at high risk for exclusionary disciplinary practices (Cartledge, Tillman, & Johnson, 2001; Townsend, 2000, Witherspoon, this issue). Although they constituted 14.9% of public school enrollment in 1998, as a group they were expelled, suspended, and subjects of corporal punishment at rates of 23%, 21%, and 27% respectively (NCES, 2001). Higher rates of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions do nothing to ameliorate the classroom behavior and academic achievement of African American students (Townsend, 2000). Instead, such practices create a domino effect that widens the achievement gap between certain culturally diverse learners and their White counterparts.

Cartledge et al. (2001) attributed the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions to the cultural clash that occurs between culturally diverse learners and White teachers. They characterized clashes in proxemics (personal distance), paralanguage (voice tone, pitch, speech rate), and verbal behavior (facial expressions, eye gazes) between the culturally diverse learner and the teacher as a cultural misunderstanding. These cultural misunderstandings contribute to negative teacher-student interactions that can lead to inappropriate behavioral referrals and/or ineffective disciplinary interventions.

To confound matters, the cultural incongruence that exists between culturally diverse students and their school environments frequently results in other discriminatory education practices such as low-end tracking, low teacher expectations, and an increase in punitive actions (Oaks, 1995). The degree to which these cumulative effects influence African American students' perceptions of their own academic identities relates directly to their academic underachievement (Steele & Aroson, 1995).

African American children who can surmount the discriminatory experiences embedded in many educational con-

texts have not received appropriate attention in the professional literature. More specifically, attributes associated with resilience or the ability to succeed despite overwhelming odds, have yet to be identified and disseminated in any systematic fashion, in order to better inform school counseling practice (Ford & Harris, 1995). Sadly, much of what is being written about African American students underscores their underachievement and subsequent school failure (Fordham, 1988, 1991; Steele, 1997, 1999). In light of this fact, the school counseling literature could benefit from a more elaborate understanding of resilient youngsters who demonstrate scholastic achievement within culturally combative and oppressive school environments. This article addresses the issue of resilience among successful African American students and identifies Rites of Passage programs as an intervention that school counselors can use to promote healthy, pro-social behaviors and academic success. The following case study illustrates one young student's ability to not only manage during tough times, but to transcend debilitating obstacles that could have short circuited her future.

Case Study

Shannon, a young, African American woman raised in the South in a drug and crime infested neighborhood, grew up without a visible and active father. Consequently, her mother worked two jobs, often leaving Shannon in the care of her older sister. Most of the children at her school received free or reduced lunch, had teachers who lacked the proper credentials, and performed well below grade level. Remarkably, Shannon was able to escape her circumstances as a child despite the fact that failure and hopelessness plagued youngsters from her community all too often. Shannon differed from most youngsters in her neighborhood, even her other sisters. In fact, one of her siblings gave birth to a child before finishing high school and although the other finished school, she went on to work for minimum wage. As a senior, Shannon was the valedictorian of her class. Upon high school graduation, she attended an Ivy League school where she majored in engineering. Currently, Shannon works for a prestigious engineering firm in the Mid-west.

Somehow, Shannon never left her home state until she attended her first college interview; to no surprise, traveling to this college interview was the first time she had flown in an airplane. Given that she was raised in a structure that was socially and psychologically tyrannical, designed for her to be maintained and controlled in all aspects of her life (in the home and in educational aspirations in particular), one might not expect Shannon to exhibit such promise.

Resilience

To reiterate, the cultural dissimilarity between culturally diverse students and their school environments can interfere with their scholastic achievement and more importantly, thwart prospects for the future. Ironically, some students can thrive amidst conditions similar to the ones Shannon experienced. Resilience, or the capacity of an individual to overcome difficult and challenging life circumstances and risk factors, has been reported as a correlate of success for many African

American students who do not succumb to certain obstacles (Getz, 2000; Littleton, 2001; Benard, 1991; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998). Resilient youngsters tend not to internalize negative societal messages that can foster unhealthy self-images and self-deprecatory behaviors (Robinson & Ward, 1991).

We contend that resilience can create a paradigm for personal growth that contributes to self-empowerment and an alteration of one's self-estimate. Robinson and Ward (1991) argue that an accurate knowledge of one's historical, racial, and cultural connections contributes to healthy psychological functioning. For many African Americans, psychological well-being necessitates an Afrocentric perspective. Incidentally, an Afrocentric perspective refers to a philosophical orientation that acknowledges the contributions African origin people have made to civilization. Afrocentrism emerged during the 1960's in an effort to: (a) balance the widespread exclusion of African and African American history from school curricula, and (b) instill a sense of pride and hope in many African Americans who over time have internalized dominant cultural perspectives about their presumed inferiority (Okara, 2001).

Resilient children, like so many African American children, experience one or more difficult life circumstances or traumatic events yet somehow find the power to overcome forces that impact their lives adversely (Clark, Brooks, Lee, Daley, & Crawford, in press). A study of 18 culturally diverse, high-achieving students in an urban high school revealed that a number of factors enhanced students' ability to remain resilient amidst poverty, family crises, and other adverse life circumstances (Herbert, 1999). Protective factors contributing to student success included: (a) supportive adults at home, at school, and in the community; (b) extracurricular after-school, Saturday, and summer enrichment programs; as well as (d) challenging educational experiences; a network of achieving peers; and a heightened sense of self.

Other factors that influence individual resilience include creativity, sociability, self-efficacy, and self-esteem; self efficacy being defined as an individual's estimate of his or her own ability to succeed, and self-esteem, as the feeling of pride in oneself (Hauser, 1999). Likewise, community involvements, such as a religious affiliation, and access to social groups and clubs, have a profound impact on individual resiliency. Relationships with adults, motivation, acceptance of responsibility, participation in community youth programs, academic success, pro-social skills training, faith in one's cognitive abilities, and communication of high expectations to youth have also been tied to resilience (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 2000; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996).

In an effort to address African American underachievement through the promotion of resilience, school counselors who possess the awareness, knowledge, and skills to help facilitate a change in attitudes and corresponding behavior of African American children become critically important. Innovative initiatives that involve the mutual and coordinated efforts of the school, community, and family have the potential to interrupt this vicious cycle of academic malaise that affects

an excessive number of African American youngsters. Although a host of interventions have demonstrated effectiveness with African American students, such as mentoring programs, church-based initiatives, and compensatory after-school programs, this article addresses the use of Rites of Passage programs to foster resilience in African American students.

Rites of Passage Programs

Rites of Passage programs have been instituted in many African American communities in an effort to help youngsters stave off the potentially destructive forces that can interfere with healthy social and cognitive functioning (Delaney, 1995). Such programs have proven successful in addressing the behavioral and academic problems of adolescents because they draw on students' familiar African American cultural contexts (Ascher, 1991). According to Arnold Van Gennep (1908) the term "rites of passage" "refers to ceremonies marking changes in a status or social position undergone as a person passes through the culturally recognized life phases of his or her society" (p. 336). Rites of Passage Programs as they have been used in many African American communities have their origins in traditional African societies where young males and females underwent separate processes for developing life skills. Essentially, youngsters were initiated into adulthood through a series of rituals (i.e. service, mentoring, trial and error experiences, and tests) that socialized them to become responsible, mature adults. In addition to learning survival skills, youngsters would acquire skills for developing character, maturity, and responsibility under the supervision of adult role models.

The adaptation of Rites of Passage Programs within modern African American communities have emerged in response to the complex challenges that a growing number of African American youth confront including drugs, crime, violence, incarceration, substandard schooling, as well as the declining significance of the church and family. The education literature is replete with all of the ills shaping the African American community, yet a scant amount of attention has been devoted to culturally supportive intervention strategies that can assist African American children achieve academic success. Instead of adapting an orientation that castigates African American people for certain life circumstances, Rites of Passage programs represent a proactive initiative that: (a) connects children to their history, literature, and cultural heritage; (b) promotes pro-social behavior; (c) validates and affirms the personhood of the child; and (d) instills a value for education. The basic premise undergirding the success of these programs is that African American youth, particularly those experiencing academic and/or behavior difficulties have a greater opportunity to thrive when receiving culturally based interventions.

Varying in composition as well as design and implementation, some programs are housed in schools while others have little or no connection with schools. Programs operating external to the school may include those Rites of Passage programs that have been developed under the auspices of African American civic and social organizations, fraternities and soror-

ities, and even an informal collection of concerned citizens who are devoted to the practice of racial uplift. Some programs have activities that last the entire day while other programs require participants to attend sessions over a protracted period of time, say two or more years. Additionally, some programs may be gender specific, (i.e. designed for males only) while other programs may be co-educational. Finally, some programs are only open to African American students and others are inclusive of all racial groups (Ascher, 1991). Despite these variations, the culture-centered focus of many Rites of Passage programs operates as a salient aspect of the program's curriculum and success (Harvey & Rauch, 1997; Ascher, 1991).

Regardless of the race or sex of participants, Rites of Passage programs typically contain a set of critical elements that facilitate cognitive and psychological growth. First, adult role models supervise program activities and form lasting bonds with participants because they recognize that far too many youngsters are plagued with ineffectual adult leadership and crave the warmth, nurturing, and guidance that role models provide. Essentially, adult role models offer a respite from such negative influences as gang membership, drug abuse, and premature sexual involvement. A second feature of Rites of Passage programs involves the cultivation of self-esteem and psychological well-being which can be eroded when children have chronic encounters with school failure, suspension, expulsion, special education placement and low teacher expectations, all of which are endemic to schools that a disproportionate number of African American children attend. Many Rites of Passage programs combat these dilemmas by helping children develop skills related to appropriate decision making, conflict resolution, self-management, and shared responsibility for others. Moreover, these programs instill in children a sense of cultural pride by helping them recognize and take pride in the contributions of Africans and African Americans to world civilization. Third, despite the fact that many African American adolescents equate academic achievement with "acting white" (Fordham, 1986), Rites of Passage programs place a high regard on academic achievement and success. In fact, many programs mandate strict attendance, provide homework assistance, expose participants to successful African Americans, and teach youngsters how to become more successful in school.

Fourth, Rites of Passage programs have enjoyed considerable success because they rely heavily on parental involvement and recognize the importance of strengthening the African American community. In such programs, parents are enlisted as allies and not adversaries who feel alienated from the program's mission. A final correlate of success for Rites of Passage programs involves the emphasis on creating a safe climate for youngsters. As discussed above, many youngsters reside in communities that provide little in the way of social, psychological, and physical safety. As such, Rites of Passage programs provide relief from the harsh realities of life. Incidentally, the program components discussed above coincide with the attributes of resilient youngsters. That is, Rites of Passage programs have a deliberate and intentional focus on

cultivating behaviors and attitudes that can lead to scholastic achievement. Given this fact, school counselors have a compelling rationale for either referring African American youngsters to Rites of Passage programs or incorporating certain program elements into their school counseling initiatives. In the final section of this manuscript, we discuss implications for school counselors.

Implications for School Counselors

In addition to either referring or incorporating certain program elements into their school counseling initiatives, school counselors can play a critical role in engaging school stakeholders in implementing partnership programs that foster student achievement and resilience.

School-family-community partnerships function as collaborative initiatives or relationships among school personnel, parents, family members, community members, and representatives of community-based organizations, such as businesses, churches, libraries, and social service agencies. All partners involved work together to coordinate and implement programs and activities aimed at the increased academic, emotional, and social success of students served by the school (Bryan, 2005; Davies, 1996).

Role of the school counselor

Charged with the role of providing support, guidance, and opportunities to its students (ASCA, 2003), school counselors must acquire the requisite awareness, knowledge, and skills to effectively collaborate with and advocate for culturally diverse children and their families. (Bemak, 2000; Keys et al., 1998). One strategy that can affect academic achievement and successful engagement behaviors for African American students involves collaborating with local churches, African American fraternities and sororities, community-based summer camps, and civic organizations that may offer Rites of Passage programs (Brigman & Campbell, 2003).

School counselors who work in particularly supportive school communities may consider developing a school based Rites of Passage program. To begin such a project, counselors may wish to consult with representatives from an existing Rites of Passage program who have expertise in the planning and development of such programs. One successful program is the Louis Armstrong Youth Development Program (LAYDP) in New Orleans. Originally founded for African American boys between the ages of 8 and 18, the program now has a co-educational orientation. The LAYDP has been in existence for approximately 25 years and operates as an after-school program during the academic year and as a summer camp at year's end. This program includes dance, music, history, African languages, martial arts, and educational tutorials with frequent cultural excursions.

When Rites of Passage programs are not in close proximity to the school, school counselors can readily access literature from bookstores, libraries, and the internet. Kimmel (1989) for example, has enumerated strategies for planning, developing, and implementing a successful Rites of Passage program. When considering the substandard educational experiences of many African American students Rites of Passage

program serve as a viable intervention that promotes scholastic achievement and social competence. School counselors can function as frontline change agents for students when they are cognizant of the sociopolitical forces that shape the concerns of children from marginalized groups, and when they have an arsenal of interventions such as Rites of Passage programs that can facilitate and enhance social and educational outcomes for children (Kurpius & Rozecki, 1992; Olatunji & Watson, 1999). Culturally competent school counselors, through the use Rites of Passage programs, can create developmentally and culturally sensitive counseling programs in schools that incorporate a sense of personal and collective agency, empowerment, and respect as an integral component of the school environment. As leaders and change agents within the school community, school counselors can effect change on a community-wide level, impacting faculty, staff, students, parents, and other key stakeholders in the neighborhood.

In summary, school counselors can ill afford to neglect the significant influences of culture in the schooling experiences of African American students. More specifically, school counselors need to deliver interventions that facilitate the academic achievement of students who encounter impediments to their success in school. Rites of Passage programs represent one such intervention, primarily because they stimulate in youngsters those attributes that seem to appear naturally in resilient youngsters.

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