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Empowering Young African American Males for the 21st Century: A Collaborative Model Between a University and an African American Church

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Currently African American male students are overrepresented on the list of those designated as "special ed" (Lee, 1991; Valentine, 2003), while at the same time being the least likely to be designated as "gifted" (Ford, 2003; Lee, 1991). The assignment of disempowering labels like "special ed" and "below proficiency" is complex and appears to be due to a host of factors. For instance, African American male youth bear the brunt of a disproportionate number of negative factors in their school environments, which include but are not limited to unsupportive and unqualified teachers ("Gap Shrinkers," 2004), the lack of involved parents (Powell, 1991; Valentine, 2003), and broad-based structural barriers internal to the educational setting (Ogbu, 1992; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). These factors clearly jeopardize the academic success of African American youth. Poverty (Valentine, 2003), poor self-esteem (Bass & Coleman, 1997; Stevenson, 2002); drugs (Bateman & Kennedy, 1997; Marsiglia, Holleran & Jackson, 2000), societal racism (Bass & Coleman, 1997; Gudorf, 1994), inadequate community supports (Viadero, 1995); and the lack of positive African American role models (Earl & Lohmann, 1978; "Gap Shrinkers," 2004; Holman, 1996; Simms, 1991) are additional risk factors for poor academic success of young African American males. Poor academic success has been and continues to be linked to marginalization and disempowerment of African American males.

Consequently, the empowerment of young African American males of such concern in this country that many African American parents, community members, scholars, and educational administrators alike continue to brainstorm ways to help these young males overcome the many barriers that they face. One re-occurring but controversial proposal to redress the inequities in the educational system surrounds the development of schools just for African American males ("*Quest for Role Models*," 1991). Proponents of these segregated schools are not contending that African American children need to be in separate schools simply to be empowered and to excel academically, because racially segregated schools where African American children are the largest proportion of students are not hard to find, especially in poor urban areas. Rather, these proponents argue that culturally sensitive and Afrocentric-oriented efforts that focus specifically on the psychosocial needs of young African American males through the use of empowerment is what is needed to attenuate the barriers that they face on a daily basis (Lee, 1991). One of the most frequently used collaborative strategies to empower African American male youths is through the use of positive, successful, and strong African American role models (Ascher, 1999; Gardner, 2001; "*Quest for Role Models*," 1991) in after school programs and/or community-based programs (Gardner, 2001; Stevenson, 2002) that operate out of an Afrocentric paradigm.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to describe the "Canaan Conference Project," a collaborative effort between Canaan Community Development

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Corporation (CCDC), a program sponsored by the Canaan Christian Church (CCC), and the University of Louisville. The thrust of this collaborative effort was to alleviate some of the harmful effects of racism through empowerment of young African American males between the ages of eight and 15. Before this collaborative effort is described in detail, however, the authors will examine empowerment within the context of social work practice, as well as a more specific Afrocentric-oriented empowerment model that has been utilized with young African American males.

Models of Empowerment

Increasingly within social work and other helping professions there has been a push toward adopting an empowerment oriented framework: assessing individuals and communities within their situational contexts and searching for clients' strengths and environmental resources on which to capitalize (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2004). This is particularly true in regards to work with youth of color where there is growing recognition of their many strengths and assets.

The roots of empowerment practice in social work are based on the assumption that being a member of a group with little social or political power has negative personal as well as social costs. Empowerment practice may take place at the individual or community level and is comprised of four subprocesses: development of a group consciousness; reduction of self-blame; assumption of personal responsibility for change; and enhancement of self-efficacy (Gutierrez, DeLois, & GlenMaye, 1995).Within this practice framework, helping relationships are collaborative and based on trust and shared power. The client(s) defines the problem and therapeutic work is focused on identifying and building upon client(s) strengths rather than addressing 'deviance' or 'pathology'(Gutierrez et al., 1995; Querimit & Conner, 2003). The goal of empowerment practice is to increase the actual power of the client or community so that action can be taken to prevent or change the problems they are facing. Social change, mobilizing resources, and/or advocacy may be a critical component of this change (Gutierrez et al., 1995).

Drawing on general models of empowerment, other researchers have created more specific Afrocentric-oriented empowerment models that are utilized with young African American males. Ascher (1991) notes that young African American males have unique needs and that school-related programming efforts geared towards young African American males should include specific components. First and foremost, Ascher argues that these young males need a safe haven away from home environments. She suggests that after-school or Saturday programming efforts convene in local community centers or churches. She further recommends that some or all of the following components be a part of the effort: 1) utilizing positive African American male models; 2) educating students about the rich history and contributions of African Americans in an effort to foster a positive self-identity and good self-esteem; 3) espousing excellence in academic values and skills; 4) fostering community involvement; and 5) assisting in the transition from boyhood to manhood through initiation rites programs.

Consistent with Ascher's recommendations, Bass and Coleman (1997) evaluated the effectiveness of a Rites of Passage Program with six African American male sixth-graders enrolled in a predominately White school. These researchers maintain that rites of passage programs address unmet needs of African American male students. According to Bass and Coleman (1997), these alternative programming efforts focus on the whole student, while paying particular attention to academic achievement, character building, cultural and self knowledge, and virtue. Using the Classroom Behavior Scale (CBS) as the primary method for assessing the students' progress in the classroom, social worker and psychologist referred African American males were assigned to a 20-week group intervention in Bass

and Coleman's study. The first 10 weeks consisted of being taught the seven principles of Kwanzaa [e.g., Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith).] The last 10 weeks focused on putting the seven Kwanzaa principles into practice. The results of the study suggest that: (a) academic motivation can be increased through knowledge building surrounding one's culture and history; and (b) that this new knowledge can lead to a dramatic decrease in behavior problems and incidents of delinquency.

As another example of how to incorporate many of Ascher's recommendations into one's programming effort, the next model clearly illustrates how to do this in a collaborative format. A collaboration between the Ohio State University (College of Education), a Columbus Public Elementary School, and men of Mt. Olivet Church resulted in an after-school program that targeted at-risk African American boys. Guided by the assumptions that 1) after-school programs provide an opportunity for talented and invested mentors to play a role in the lives of children; 2) participation in after-school programs translates into time away from television and negative influences in the urban environment; and 3) after-school programming efforts bridge the gap in services offered by schools. Stakeholders in this collaboration felt that the effort would positively impact the male children in the program (Gardner, 2001). The thrusts of this collaborative effort included excellence in education, strong Christian values, and knowledge about African American history (Gardner, 2001). All of these facets are instrumental in the effort to empower young African American males. A corrective reading program, a peer tutoring (math related) training program, a behavior star rewarding program, and classroom behavior management strategies were also incorporated into this after-school program. The results of this study, which was based on a comparison between the baseline and post-intervention assessments, found that academic and social gains were noted in all of the young African American males who participated in the program. Specifically, improvements were noted in reading skills and math fluency. Moreover, skill acquisition in peer tutoring, which was noted in the boys who participated in this, has also been shown to improve students' interpersonal and social skills (Gardner, 2001).

Yet another example of a model that incorporated some of Ascher's assumptions is PLAAY. Using African American peers, undergraduate students, and older adults as role models, Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression in Youth (PLAAY) is a multi-layered intervention used with African American youth between the ages of 10 and 19. PLAAY's approach to managing anger and aggression involves empowerment techniques that combine a martial arts aggression reduction curriculum; face-to-face in-vivo anger management basketball coaching; community-based parent empowerment education (COPE); and a rites of passage program (ROPE). The aim of this intervention is to assess, intervene with, and decrease anger and aggression among African American youth who have a history of aggression during basketball play (Stevenson, 2002). Anecdotally, this model suggests that such interventions make a difference.

As a final example of a model that incorporated some of Ascher's assumptions, the *Sons of Issachar* is presented here. As the harmful effects of poverty, youth crime, and dropout rates come to light, many African American pastors believe it is important to speak on this delicate issue and to offer hope to African American youth and their families. Canaan Community Development Corporation (CCDC), which is located in Louisville, Kentucky, under the leadership of Dr. Walter Malone, Jr., is acutely aware of the havoc and suffering experienced by young African American males who lose sight of dreams and possibilities for their lives. As a non-profit enterprisé of Canaan Christian Church (CCC), the CCDC has come to the realization that

faith-based after school programs can play a significant role in helping inner-city African American male youth to escape from a world of deprivation.

To transform the mindset and attitudes of African American males between the ages of 8-15 years of age, Canaan Community Development Corporation, a program sponsored by the Canaan Christian Church, offers the *Sons of Issachar*, a free, after school academy. The academy's creed reads: "As a *Son of Issachar*, we believe in the dignity of hard work and using our minds to develop the talents and abilities entrusted in us. We will strive to be Sons with a mind to understand the times, to do the right thing, and to seek to develop the integrity and character hidden within ourselves." (Canaan Community Development Corporation, 2003). The target age group is expected to participate in the academy on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. September to June. The following five program components define the after school program.

1. **Leadership Development**—Participants receive instruction on how to sharpen their vision, discover purpose in their lives, improve communication skills, and explore strategies in planning career choices.
2. **Tutoring and Homework Assistance and Study Skill Enhancement**—This component is designed to teach young scholars how to succeed in school and be responsible for their own learning. Scholars learn how to organize homework, manage time, develop good study habits, and how to prepare for tests and quizzes. The curriculum is concentrated in Reading, Math, and Science because these are areas where African American youth continue to lag behind their White and Asian counterparts (McDaniels, 1996; Roach, 2002; "*Urban Test Scores Below National Average, Study Shows*" 2004).
3. **Life Skills Training**—Young men are led through a series of modules designed to develop critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving skills. The modules include, but are not limited to, disciplinary strategies; self-determination; decision-making steps; peer pressure; anger management and social responsibility; and goal setting.
4. **Character Education**—This component is designed to assist youth in developing a solid foundation of ethical principles such as integrity and honesty; how to follow directions, behave responsibly, develop self-worth; and develop an understanding on the importance of change and how to adapt.
5. **Parent and Family Support Services**—Through this component parents engage in practical workshops to empower the family and to build in support for success. Parents are offered services which include job readiness training, job placement, GED preparation, parent support groups, and computer training.

The holistic approach to reaching African American boys through the *Sons of Issachar* is commendable and an excellent starting place for faith-based community/university initiatives. This programming effort appears to be useful, but it has not been empirically demonstrated in the literature at this time. Future programming efforts should aim to empirically evaluate the nature of community interventions of this type.

The Canaan Conference Project: A Collaboration between Canaan Christian Church and the University of Louisville

All of the previously discussed models offer hope and direction for developing a viable model for attenuating some of the harmful effects of racism on the young African American male by incorporating all or some of the recommended suggestions offered by Ascher (1991).

The authors will now discuss a model, the "Canaan Conference Project," that many of them were a part of in Louisville, Kentucky, which was a collaborative effort between Canaan Christian Church and the University of Louisville.

The University of Louisville has been in existence for more than 200 years and is one of the oldest urban

universities in the United States. Its mission as an urban metropolitan university includes serving a diverse population of ethnic minorities and recognizing the inter-relatedness of the community's development and educational needs. Serving as the commonwealth's university, it also has a special obligation to serve the educational, intellectual, cultural, service, and research needs of greater Louisville. As a department of the university, the Raymond A. Kent School of Social Work also shares the metropolitan mission, goals, and objectives of the university. The Kent School seeks to prepare competently trained social workers, in the context of a research institution, who are educated to practice with individuals, families, and communities to promote social justice and to collaborate from a strengths perspective with different disciplines to solve complex social problems. While the trend toward collaboration between churches and universities is not well documented, the increasing need to buffer African American youth from social and environmental hardships highlights an urgent need to understand the practice of collaboration in communities where African American males live, work, congregate, socialize, and otherwise spend time.

Background of the Canaan Conference Project

In addition to offering the *Sons of Issachar*, a free after school academy, Canaan Community Development Corporation (CCDC) also held the Canaan Conference Project in 2004 as an extension of the Sons of Issachar. The birth of this conference was the result of a discussion between the director of the CCDC program and a Kent School faculty member. Both of these individuals attend Canaan Christian church. The meeting occurred at the CCDC site when the *Sons of Issachar* was in session. During this particular meeting, some of the young men's behaviors were very disruptive. It became apparent to the faculty member that morethan an individual effort was needed to redirect these youth on a long-term basis. The faculty member suggested a motivational conference for the young men that would be organized and carried out by Master's level students in the Kent School of Social Work. This idea was subsequently discussed with the social work Foundation Practice faculty in the Kent School of Social Work who wholeheartedly supported the idea. Subsequently, 125 Master's level students representing five sections of social work Foundation Practice classes organized a conference. This conference was entitled the "Canaan Conference Project."

First year MSSW students who were enrolled in foundation practice courses were divided into five groups, each of which assumed responsibility for a separate activity relative to the organization of the conference. The class assignment distribution was as follows: Group 1 developed topics for the breakout sessions in collaboration with the CCDC staff and mentors within the *Sons of Issachar* program as well as the Kent School faculty. Topics addressed current challenges faced by African-American youth as well as issues critical to positive youth development. Group 2 recruited highly visible African American male speakers from the Louisville community who have established themselves as positive mentors. Group 3 organized university and community publicity utilizing various communications such as flyers, agency bulletin boards, electronic notices, and personalized invitations to various community-wide leaders. Group 4 students prepared and distributed evaluations to all participants. Finally, Group 5 assisted CCDC staff in organizing lunch for the participants. They also served as greeters to visitors, youth and their families as they arrived at CDCC. Students ended their participation in the conference project by writing a five-page scholarly paper that addressed the following questions:

Discuss the African American adolescent from a strengths perspective. What are some of the issues facing them and what are contributing factors to those issues?

1. Discuss the steps and decision making process that was involved in completing the assigned task. What facilitated and what constrained the process?

2. Discuss the overall outcome of the conference.
3. What, if anything, would you do differently?
4. What three things did you learn from this assignment?

The Canaan Conference Project

Guided by an empowerment framework and an attendant understanding of the current environmental and contextual structures impacting the lives of young African-American males growing up in a large urban area, the goal of this conference was to meet the youth on their own terms. As such, the conference was held at CCDC, a location that was familiar, convenient, and comfortable to many of the youth who would attend.

The conference was designed with an intended outcome of providing a learning space where young African-American males could have a positive mentoring experience from successful adult African-American males from the metropolitan community. This goal of the conference was rooted in both the assertions that many of these young men do not have adequate opportunities for positive adult mentoring experiences and that the literature supported adult mentoring as a viable means of experiential learning (Gardiner, 2001; Quest for Role Models, 1991; Stephenson, 2002).

The conference structure was informed by an understanding of the cognitive and emotional development of young adolescents. Although the conference lasted for a total of three hours, activities were broken up into distinct segments, separated by mini-breaks. Following the plenary address, a series of two 45-minute break-out sessions comprised of a number of concurrent presentations or workshops were held. Consistent with the empowerment framework, youth were given the ability to choose which break-out session they would attend. Development of a positive sense of ethnic identity as well as positive self-esteem are important developmental tasks associated with adolescence generally, and more specifically for African American youth (Newman & Newman, 1995; Phinney, Lochner, & Murphy, 1990). Among African-American youth, ethnic identity is associated with increased self-esteem and more positive psychological outcomes (Martinez & Dukes, 1997). For example, positive ethnic identity appears to act as a buffer against depression for African American adolescents (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). Moreover, McMahon and Watts (2002) concluded from a review of the literature that a strong ethnic identity, specifically an Afrocultural orientation defined as an endorsement of spirituality, communalism, and emotional expressiveness (Jagers & Mock, 1993; McMahon & Watts, 2002) "may serve as a protective factor for urban, at-risk youth" (McMahon & Watts, 2002, p. 413).

Relatedly, positive self-esteem, specifically racial self-esteem and/or levels of Afrocentricity, have been associated with enhanced academic performance among some samples of African American youth (Saunders, Davis, Williams & Williams, 2004; Spencer, Swanson, & Cunningham, 1991). Thus topics that allowed presenters to address issues of ethnic/cultural identity development and self-esteem were seen as critical to empowering the youth.

Sessions addressing issues related to goal setting and promotion of healthy life choices were based on an understanding that development of these important self-regulatory skills is associated with increased self-efficacy and subsequent behavioral change (Bandura, 1994; Fisher & Fisher, 2000). Moreover, research suggests that processes that promote self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as present opportunities for engagement in positive activities, may promote resilience in at-risk youth (Harvey & Hill, 2004; Saleebey, 2001). Therefore, the conference as a whole was seen as a mechanism by which to influence positive youth development and empower the participants.

Consistent with the empowerment framework that guided the project, ethnic/cultural identity development, self-esteem, goal setting, and making healthy life choices were themes covered. Break-out

sessions were given "lay language" titles that would appeal to the youth. For example, selected topics were:

1. *When The Going "Gets" Tough, The Tough "Gets" Going*
2. *How To Be A Man: The Real Deal*
3. *Keeping It Real When Others Give Up On You*
4. *I Know I Can Be What I Wanna Be*
5. *As Good As I Wanna Be*
6. *Show Me Your Friends And I'll Tell You Your Future*
7. *Knocked Down But Not Out*
8. *If Street Smarts Could Send Me To College, I'd Be A Doctor*
9. *How To Be Slim Shady, But Become Bill Gates*
10. *The Power Of Dream*
11. *How To Get The Ching, Ching For The Bling, Bling*

All the conference presenters were African American men recruited from the local community. The presenters represented a broad array of respected and successful community members: a college basketball player; businessmen/ entrepreneurs; social service workers; a university professor; an attorney; and a minister. The decision to recruit only African American male speakers was guided by the belief that linkage with positive, African American, male community members in a concrete way would contribute to the youths' sense of positive ethnic identity. Finally, it is notable that none of the presenters were compensated for their time; rather, they freely donated both their time and talent to ensuring the success of the project.

Youth and their families from CCDC and Master of Science in Social Work (MSSW) students from the Kent School of Social Work participated in the conference. Approximately 13 youth, ages eight to 15, and 90 adult students self selected for participation in the concurrent topics. Foundation Practice faculty were also present for facilitation purposes.

The collected data from the evaluations served as outcome measures. They were used to evaluate the project and to interpret the results for modification of future collaborative efforts. Using a Likert scale, participants were asked to rank their selected presentations and the quality of the overall conference. Data were collected from 54 returned evaluations. Additionally, students interviewed the 13 youth and their families for a narrative account of their comments and suggestions for future conferences.

As part of the data analysis, students discussed the overall outcome of the project and made suggestions for future projects of this kind. Recommendations included that a) more advertising in African-American churches be carried out throughout the region in an effort to increase participation from youth; b) more lead time be allotted for planning the conference so that youth participation is increased; and c) that youth and adults attend separate sessions. Additionally, some students voiced a preference to plan an entire project from start to finish rather than prepare segments as was done in this project. Some students felt the segments left them with a fragmented vision of the total conference.

In order to continue building a sense of community as well as honor the collaborative nature of the partnership between the Raymond A. Kent School of Social Work, CCDC, and Sons of Issachar, the conference concluded by the sharing of a meal among participants as well as the presenters, CCDC staff, and University students and faculty.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The importance and function of the African American church and other faith-based initiatives within the African American community has been well documented (Billingsley, 1992; Dhooper & Moore, 2001; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McRae, Thompson & Cooper, 1999). The African American church has historically risen to the occasion to address human needs through the pooling and sharing of human and economic resources (Dilulio, 1999). Second only in importance to the family, the African American church provides spiritual, emotional, psychological, physical and social support to

congregates and non-congregates alike. Some of the vehicles through which these supports are provided include: worship and prayer services; self-help and support groups; teen pregnancy and parenting groups; pastoral private counseling services; voter registration initiatives; skilled nursing homes; lay health advisory networks; congregate feeding programs; after school programs; tutorial, literacy and academic enrichment programs (Dhooper & Moore, 2001). Because of the demonstrated needs of young African American males and the proven ability of the African American church to willingly provide valuable and effective services within its community, it is reasonable to assert that professionals can support collaborations between the African American church and secular institutions in an effort to meet human needs.

The collaboration discussed in this paper was a first time endeavor between the Canaan Community Development Corporation and the Raymond A. Kent School of Social Work. Many practice principles were learned by both the masters' level social work students and the young African American males who participated in this collaborative. The social work students learned about the nature and scope of some of the social currents that work against the success and healthy development of young African American males. They learned about the importance of the African American church and faith-based initiatives in the lives of African Americans and how these institutions serve as vital resources. They learned about the importance of empowering youth to voice their needs instead of allowing others to identify what is best for them. They learned to appreciate the knowledge and life experience of adult African American men who thrive and survive and go on to model manhood for up and coming males in a society where they are often marginalized and devalued. They also learned that many of their initial thoughts about this population were based not on factual information but instead on pre-conceived ideas that often germinate from minimal contact with a group. As a result, we believe these students will become more effective workers with this population to the extent that they are able to transfer learning from this experience to their practice.

Likewise, the young men who were the intended audience of this project were exposed to members of the helping profession, perhaps for the first time, who functioned differently from what they may have been experiencing. Instead of being visited by a helping professional who sometimes had to make tough decisions about out-of-home placement or child custody issues, they came into contact with social work practitioners and aspiring practitioners whose role was perceived as supportive and encouraging. These young males were exposed to the advocacy role of social work practitioners who helped empower them to reach their potential for greatness by encouraging them towards academic success. In doing so social workers helped youth to explore their creative genius and challenged them to become future creators of healthy families, role models for other young males, leaders within society, and productive citizens.

Conclusion

Social work and other helping professions are concerned with the plight of those in need, among which are young African American males. If human service professionals are to effectively address issues that constrain the growth and development of this population, then creative ways to ameliorate their problems need to be developed. African American people are a very religious group, place significance upon religion and spirituality, and respond well to faith-based programs (Constantine et al., 2000; Hill, 1999). Hence, faith-based collaboratives are not only timely, but germane areas for exploration as agents of growth, renewal and change.

As shown through this collaborative effort, several groups benefit when a group of individuals like African American males reap the benefits of faith-based and university-based collaborations.

African American youth benefit from such collaborations when the exposure to positive African American male role models is increased, positive social outlets are provided, positive reinforcements are offered for academic growth and success, and self-esteem is improved. Adult African American males who serve as role models benefit from such collaborations because it serves as an impetus for "giving back" as is often expected from those "who make it." These African American males also fully realize that their participation in such programming efforts also contributes to the growth and development of younger African American males. Like African American youth and adult role models, African American churches, community agencies, and universities also benefit greatly from such collaborations because they support the disempowered and serve as "agitators" for macro improvement. These organizations realize that these young men's success is the entire community's success and that positive interventions with these individuals will not only affect the young African American male, but that these interventions will also affect others as well at the micro, meso, and macro levels as suggested by social system theorists. In essence, if the young African American male succeeds, then so does his greater community. As social work students trained from the social systems paradigm, participants of programming efforts of this nature acquire first hand exposure to how subsystems interact with larger systems and how these many systems invariably impact one other.

Universities and African American churches can effectively connect their many resources and create healthy communities. The Raymond A. Kent School of Social Work and Canaan Community Development Corporation propose a collaborative model between social work faculty and students and African American churches that could have broad application across various cultural settings. Coordinated involvement between social work students, parents, and congregational members can serve as both formal and informal sources of empowerment agencies and programming efforts geared towards empowering African American males. While these network-building efforts may struggle to initiate a spark in the beginning, focused planning, respect for different perspectives, and organizational learning are crucial for success.

These collaborative projects can generate opportunities to offer training for social work students on how to work collaboratively with community agencies. As a collaborative team, the Raymond A. Kent School of Social Work and the Canaan Community Development Corporation are learning to join in agreement regarding the social, personal, intellectual, cultural, and educational needs of the *Sons of Issachar*. Such a partnership shows that the needs of these young males can be better served when organizations work in concert and when resources and sources of support are pooled.

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