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Promoting Achievement for African American Males through Group Work

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Promoting Achievement for African American Males through Group Work

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The authors describe how the effective use of groups can promote academic achievement for adolescent African American males. Literature regarding adolescents' and African Americans' experience with groups is reviewed. The authors provide information on academic disidentification and achievement gaps, both critical to understanding the problem of academic achievement for this population. Finally, specific group interventions employed by Gentlemen on the Move (GOTM) (Bailey, 2001; Bailey, 2005; Bailey & Paisley, 2004), a group founded and directed by the authors and dedicated to developing and nurturing academic and social excellence in African American males, is discussed.

Keywords: *adolescent groups; African American males*

In a competitive global economy, attaining an education is critical to the economic and social survival of the individual. Moreover, that education needs to include training that equips the individual for creative problem solving and critical thinking skills that increase their chances of success with postsecondary opportunities. In the high school setting, this type of education is often limited to advanced college preparatory (moderately rigorous) or advanced placement (highly rigorous) classes, few of which are populated by African American male students (Advanced Placement Report to the Nation, 2006; The Education Trust, 1999). Relative to African American male students and academic achievement, the problem is two-fold. Some African American male students choose not to take these levels of courses while others lack the academic background to survive in them; for either reason, academic achievement limits their postsecondary options and future

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earning potential (Bailey, 2003; Locke, 1999). For school counselors and other professionals interested in changing the trajectory for African American male students, the appropriate use of groups dedicated to this population can provide an important contribution to promoting the academic achievement of African American male students. Research (Bailey, 2003; Bailey, Phelps, Bradbury-Bailey, & Stewart, in review; Ghee, Walker, & Younger, 1997) provides guidance for the successful use of group work to mediate academic achievement for adolescent African American males.

GROUPS FOR ADOLESCENTS

Adolescence represents a turbulent time for any population, during which young people question many things about themselves and their surroundings (Dusek, 1995). Adolescents struggle to identify their definition of self amid the social pressure of school and home-life (Cobb, 2001; McDevitt & Ormond, 2002). Along with infancy, adolescence is one of the times during the lifespan when individuals experience rapid and dramatic changes (Eccles & Harold, 1993). This period is a time in which many students have increased behavior problems regardless of family structure or ethnic background. Because these students are at a crossroads where they are no longer children, but not yet adults, frustration accumulates, and its effects are often transferred into the school setting. Student frustration is often communicated through their loss of interest in school, lack of social communication, and increase in violent and disruptive behaviors (Jaffe, 1998; Vernon, 2002).

Through the use of groups, the counselor can provide a safe place for group members to share fears, frustrations, and misunderstanding associated with problems faced by adolescents (Malekoff, 1997). More specifically, group counseling can be very useful for the adolescent population because of their need for social acceptance and belonging. As noted by Gladding (2003), adolescents seek peer validation through self-discovery and self-affirmation. The students' need for this social acceptance provides the motivation for them to talk actively about issues related to adolescent problems, thereby encouraging the therapeutic process (Corey, 1999; Gladding, 2003; Myrick, 2002).

For school counselors and other professionals working with adolescents, group work represents one method especially effective with this population because of the discussion forum that operates at its core. This discussion forum allows adolescents to share experiences, problems, and reactions to situations as well as to explore alternative reactions and potential solutions (Drucker, 2003; Malekoff, 1997).

In addition, groups provide a comfortable setting for discussion and problem-solving because of the amount of time adolescents spend in groups during the course of a normal day including social groups, school groups, family groups, and, sometimes work groups. Thus, for most adolescents the group setting would seem a logical way to work through problems shared by other group members (Bergen, 2004; Gladding, 2003).

Groups for Adolescent African American Males

Within a homogeneous group setting, African Americans males usually feel more comfortable sharing experiences, deliberating over problems, and brainstorming possible solutions (Ford, 1997; Merta, 1995; Williams, Frame, & Green, 1999). This setting provides a safer environment for personal disclosure than individual counseling sessions, because there is "safety in numbers" (Merta, 1995). Ford reports that "group counseling experiences may help African Americans increase their sense of hope and optimism, decrease their feelings of alienation, develop more effective coping techniques, and acquire more effective socialization skills" (p. 103).

Establishing groups with adolescent African American males who need to be challenged academically or who are struggling academically can provide this same homogeneous environment that would allow its members to examine the problem without feeling attacked individually and develop solutions that could be attempted by all group members. The group setting would then provide a structure for group members to share their experiences as they employ possible solutions; in addition, a sense of accountability could begin to develop among group members since the problem is not individual, but "owned" by all group members (Hopkins, 1993; Steward, 1993; Sue & Sue, 2003; Tucker, 1999).

The effectiveness of group counseling with adolescent African American males stems from cultural norms that are shared by members of this group. Positive values incorporated by most African Americans include the importance of spirituality, family, and creative expression, all of which utilize or are expressed within the domains of a group setting (Gainor, 1992; Rollock, Westman, & Johnson, 1992; Shipp, 1983; Williams, Frame, & Green, 1999). Furthermore, for African Americans, collective identity proves to be much more powerful than individual identity; thus, group work with this population has the potential to use this characteristic to allow for a strong interplay between group goals and group member responsibility for achieving those goals (Perrone & Sedlacek, 2000; Shipp, 1983; Sue & Sue, 2003; Williams, Frame, & Green, 1999).

Group Work Dedicated to Academic Achievement for Adolescent African American Males

Understanding the problems that plague the educational experiences of African American males represents a critical first step in designing and implementing effective groups for African American adolescents. First of all, many gifted and academically talented African American males choose not to take advanced courses. For many, the choice stems from their inability to identify themselves as academically capable in spite of the fact that some educators and educational systems do. Steele (1992) has associated this choice with the concept of academic disidentification. Steele defines academic disidentification as a lack of relationship between academic self-esteem and global self-esteem and coined the term to explain the academic discrepancy between Black and White test scores. His notion of academic disidentification explains the difference in academic achievement by stating that some African Americans perform worse than Whites, because for them academic success does little to promote their global self-esteem. Academic disidentification represents the process by which the individual's general self concept becomes increasingly less identified with academic performance the longer the student attends school. Furthermore, it acts as a psychological defense mechanism that protects one's self esteem and vulnerabilities by causing a fracture in the relationship between academic achievement and overall self-concept (Cokley, 2002; Steele, 1992). Steele's concept of academic disidentification runs parallel to Obgu's (1987) concept of "acting White" as well as society's notion of masculinity. Simply put, to be male, African American, and academic are oxymorons unless the academic self is masked by extreme athletic or musical ability. Lacking the latter, young men believe they must be seen as tough, cool, or thuggish in order to be accepted.

For some African American students, a marriage between self-esteem and academic achievement does not exist, thus making academic achievement unimportant to them. Cokley (2002) reports that:

> African American male students, like other students, initially identify with academic success and are motivated to do well because it fosters a positive self image and academic self-concept. However, negative experiences in school and constant bombardment of negative societal messages about African Americans, especially African American males, create a pervasive awareness of the negative stereotypes associated with their racial/ethnic group. (p. 379)

Academic achievement is not seen as something which to aspire to because the African American male student does not make it a part of

his self-definition. Another factor that further complicates the matter is that African American male students receive pressure from their peers to be unsuccessful. Steele (1992) asserts that, "once disidentification occurs in a school, it can spread like the common cold" (p. 74). Many African American male students refuse to do well in school for fear that their peers will question their authenticity of "Blackness" and "maleness."

Gaining insight into the relationship between academic achievement and African American males will help counselors establish a relevant framework for groups implemented to improve academic achievement for this population. Group leaders will need to be sensitive to the possibility of academic disidentification for some of its group members. To assume a relationship exists between self-esteem and academic performance could result in the development of group sessions that seem irrelevant to group members. Instead of focusing on academics initially, it would be more appropriate to focus on the identity of group members and develop positive working relationships (Bailey, 2005). Steele suggests several ways in which educators might reconcile the problem of academic disidentification. They include ensuring that: (1) students feel valued for their potential and worth as a person, (2) the education of students should be guided by the challenge and personal fulfillment, not remediation, and (3) the particulars of Black life and culture should be presented in the mainstream curriculum of American schooling, not consigned to special days or months of the year (Steele, 1992, p. 79).

The second part of the problem associated with academic achievement for African American males revolves around the achievement gap that exists between this population and their White counterparts. Data from the Education Trust (2003) pinpoints academic achievement gaps between African American adolescents and their White and Asian American peers. These gaps are confirmed by local school district data, especially in the areas of reading and math. In addition, national (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005), state (State of Georgia K–12 report card, 2006), and local data (Clarke County School District, 2005) indicate that White and Asian American students typically outperform African American and Latino students on high stakes tests. These high stakes test are used by both middle and high schools to place students in upper level and college-bound classes, thus continuing the widening of both achievement and opportunity gaps. These gaps lessen the opportunities for admission into postsecondary institutions as students progress through school. Further compounding the problem of the achievement gap are the types of classes in which students are enrolled. As a result, certain students (i.e., African American males) receive an education that is both

different and inferior to that of their White counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 1994). African American males usually end up in vocational, general, and or low-level education tracks based on ability grouping in core areas. As a result, many receive a water-downed curriculum with low academic expectations and poorer instruction from educators that are either new or teaching out of field (Ladson-Billings, 1994; The Education Trust, 1999).

Too often students are not asked if they want the vocational, general, or low-level curriculum; they are simply assigned to it by counselors, teachers, administrators, and, in many instances, parents (Ladson-Billings, 1994; The Education Trust, 1999; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). It appears that assignment into these classes is based more often on behavior rather than performance (Ladson-Billings; The Education Trust; Thernstrom & Thernstrom). Students who are bored with the watered down curriculum of a vocational, general, or low-level core class act out their frustration and boredom and end up with more discipline referrals and a lower grade.

Relative to the achievement gap, tracking only serves to widen the gap and make it virtually impossible for even an African American male in his second year of high school to be prepared for postsecondary options. By this time, the student has been tracked into, for example, lower level math classes and will only be in geometry by the time they are in their third of year of high school and in the best-case scenario, Algebra II by his fourth year of high school. Tracking in this area alone will have several ramifications relative to their preparation for a postsecondary institution. For example: 1) their PSAT and SAT scores will be lower because they have not had as much of the advanced math as other students, 2) they will have to delay when they take the test in an attempt to have as much advanced math as possible, thereby delaying their application to college, 3) they may not have all the math required by some postsecondary institutions, and 4) math placement often determines science placement, so they also fall behind in that core area as well. Consequently, these students do not look as good on paper as other applicants perpetuating the myth that they are intellectually inferior and can only perform to certain academic levels. This can play a major role in the student's perception of their own academic ability. Instead of seeing themselves as "behind" academically and maturing later academically than their White counterparts, they begin to believe the negative and actually perform below their capabilities when challenged in an upper level class (Locke, 1999; Obgu, 1987; The College Board, 1999). In addition, African American males are rarely recommended for gifted and talented programs; these programs typically involve the best teachers, have fewer students, and usually have a special budget that allows those teachers to do more

creative and thought-provoking activities with their students (Ford, 1996; Grosso de Leon, 2002).

As with academic disidentification, understanding the experiences that result in achievement gaps for African American males can help group leaders develop better group sessions that would meet student needs. Traditionally, these students have experienced classes that are a combination of watered down curriculum taught by teachers who have low expectations of them. To counter this, group leaders need to determine how to set and maintain high expectations as well as how to set and achieve academic goals for group members. Given that males and African Americans represent two groups that traditionally shy away from counseling as a means of problem-solving (Bailey & Moore, 2005) group leaders will also need to be aware of negative attitudes that could impede the group process. African American adolescent males usually only participate in counseling due to a school or court system referral, known as forced choice (Lee & Bailey, 2005). As a result, counseling may be viewed as a punishment rather than a beneficial experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS SPECIFIC TO ADOLESCENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

Culturally responsive counselors need to understand and be sensitive to the cultural dynamics that impact their work with a group of adolescent African American males. First of all, it needs to be understood that members of this population must contend with the development of three separate identities—the dominant culture of the United States, the African American culture, and the African American male culture; the counselor also needs to be aware that characteristics of the dominant culture may not be embraced by group members (Locke, 1999).

Furthermore, the group counselor must be able to recognize cultural ways of expression, both verbal and nonverbal, that differ from the dominant culture to allow the group to develop to its full potential. Miscommunication between the group leader or school counselor and group members can seriously impede progress toward group goals (Brinson & Lee, 1997; Gladding, 2003). To exemplify this, Brinson and Lee report that "African Americans may display their emotions in culturally specific language patterns or by displaying nonverbal behavior in a demonstrative manner" (p. 48). How a counselor that is not African American responds to these differences in behavior and expression can impact group development. For example, it would be important for non-African American counselors to respond in a culturally responsive manner. This would include not responding in a defensive or judgmental manner.

Finally, the counselor must be aware of his or her own biases and stereotypes involving this population. Awareness will allow the counselor to plan, implement, and respond appropriately during group sessions (Holcomb-McCoy, 2003). Awareness on the part of the counselor can be an effective tool in building relationships between the group leader and group members (Bailey, 2005). Furthermore, it can help the counselor understand the difference between community identity and individual differences when working with group members. Holcomb-McCoy (2003) suggests, "One possible pitfall of ethnically homogeneous groups is that the leader and members may assume similarities and deemphasize the differences among members" (p. 155). Although the sense of community is critical to the African American identity, the unique characteristics of the individual must also be recognized and valued for group members to embrace group goals. In other words, individual identities must be embraced so that each member feels that their ways of being are accepted and valued.

Gentlemen on the Move: An Academic Support Group for African American Males

Gentlemen on the Move (GOTM) was initially founded 17 years ago to combat the low academic performance of African American high school males, but has since evolved into Empowered Youth Programs, a support group for male and female students from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds who may or may not be reaching their academic and social potential. The purpose of GOTM is to develop and nurture academic and social excellence in adolescent African American males in grades K–12 using a comprehensive and developmental approach (Bailey, 2001; Bailey, 2003; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Ellis, 2004; Lee & Bailey, 2005). Major components of the program that depend on the use of groups include the Saturday Academy and Exam Lock-In (Bailey, 2003; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Bailey, Phelps, Bradbury-Bailey, & Stewart, in review). Both of these components of GOTM provide multiple opportunities for African American males to participate in a positive group experience. Program membership is based upon self-selection and depends on a variety of sources. Some students are referred by teachers, school counselors, and administrators, while most come because of recommendations from other parents of GOTM participants, and other program participants (Bailey & Paisley; Bailey, Phelps, Bradbury-Bailey, & Stewart, in review).

The exam lock-in: A group approach to exam preparation. The exam lock-in (ELI) occurs the weekend before Fall Semester and Spring Semester Final Exams, many of which are state-mandated

standardized tests. During the ELI, group members are engaged in an overnight weekend long intense exam preparation experience (Bailey et al., in review). High school participants are locked in one of the local partnering high schools from Friday afternoon until Sunday afternoon, where they participate in both individual and group study sessions and quiz periods in preparation for state end-of-course tests and final exams. Culturally competent and relevant educators and graduate students staff the Lock-In as suggested by Ladson-Billings (1994). Teachers and graduate students who teach in the Saturday academy rotations also work during the ELI. Again, these adults were recruited because of their reputations and ability to engage African American students in the teaching and learning process. This means that they were able to help students learn in a manner that took into consideration their culturally based learning styles. Another important characteristic of these teachers and graduate students is that they possess high expectations for GOTM participants and are able to nurture program participants, while at the same time maintaining appropriate boundaries (with consequences) (Bailey, 2005). Since the teachers and graduate students will act as group leaders for group study and group quiz sessions, they need to be especially strong in of the areas of math and science.

The ELI incorporates a multifaceted approach to intensive exam preparation utilizing highly structured individual, small group, and peer tutoring. The ELI consists of sixteen 60-minute study sessions and eight 30-minute quiz sessions over two nights and two days (5 pm Friday to 3 pm Sunday). While individual study time is provided, the majority of the study and quiz sessions are held in small groups (3–5 per group) and directed by teachers or graduate students. During the ELI, students are also engaged in structured team-building activities that provide students with breaks and opportunities to relieve tension sometimes associated with intense study (Bailey et al., in review). These team-building activities involved icebreakers to enhance the cooperative mindset as students began the ELI and to provide a different type of interaction between participants, teachers, graduate students, and volunteers. As a result of the ELI, GOTM participants, on average, outperformed their classmates and exceeded teacher predictions on their semester exams (Bailey et al., in review).

Lessons learned. Time has revealed that academic and social performance go hand in hand and to ignore the social development of adolescent African American males usually means losing any academic gains as well (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). By using groups as a framework for two of the program's main components, GOTM participants have been able to make both academic and social gains

(Bailey et al., in review). Critical to the success of these groups is recognizing the importance of building positive relationships with group members through a show of commitment, clearly defined boundaries with consequences, and a willingness to listen to feedback from program participants.

Counselors who intend to run groups with an academic focus for adolescent African American males should first take the time to build positive relationships with group members (Bailey, 2005). Time represents commitment. For that reason, GOTM does not accept volunteers or paid staff not willing to commit to work with the students for three out of the four Saturdays a month as part of the Saturday Academy. For the ELI, group leaders are expected to spend the entire weekend "camping out" with GOTM participants and participating in all group and individual study and quiz sessions. It is important for GOTM participants to see a high level of commitment on the part of the adults working with the program. Time builds relationships because it allows walls to be broken down as well as trust and respect to be developed.

Secondly, as part of building that relationship with group members, counselors need to understand the importance of meeting them where they are in their personal development and remember that these young people need the adults in their lives to be adults not their friends. If program participants consider program staff members as friends, it is considered a bonus. GOTM establishes clearly defined boundaries with definite consequences for ignoring these boundaries. Establishing boundaries actually helps adolescent African American males feel a degree of safety, critical to the success of the group experience (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Orpinas & Horne, 2006). For example, excellent attendance is expected from GOTM participants because that is an established boundary. In an exit interview, a GOTM participant explained how he used to stay out extremely late on Friday evenings participating in activities that were not necessarily beneficial to his social and academic development. After joining GOTM, the group became his "excuse" for not hanging out with the "guys," many of whom had already dropped out of high school.

Helping to teach an academic rotation or spend time tutoring a student begins the relationship process for GOTM participants. They receive a consistent message of commitment, high expectations, and encouragement as they work to strengthen themselves academically and socially. As the relationship develops, engaging these young men in discussions that include an historical perspective is an excellent place to start. This allows the GOTM staff opportunities to gain an understanding of the student's perspective of their reality, both academically and socially. Listening to their stories at this point

represents a critical component in building the relationship between the adults working with the program and GOTM participants. We have found that group leaders listening to GOTM participants' concerns regarding their school and GOTM experiences is critical to finding possible solutions to the barriers that hinder the participants' academic and social success.

CONCLUSION

After 45 combined years of teaching and counseling experience, the authors believe that African American male students know they have a problem, so it is critical that counselors avoid sugar coating the reality . . . they are behind and the world knows it. Instead, counselors should tackle the problem head on. Counselors acting as group leaders can encourage African American males to look at other areas in which they excel (i.e., sports, art, band, etc.) and apply the same strategies to improve academically and socially. This means encouraging them, and in some cases, pushing them to acknowledge where they are and to improve by first developing strong foundations in the core academic areas. This will require the group facilitators to see these young men as they are, behind academically, but to envision them as they could be, academically sound. This may require having group members tested for reading and math levels, in order to start from their actual performance levels, and, as a group, setting individual and group goals to assist them in getting to where they could and should be academically and socially. For some schools, districts, communities, and families, this means creating a climate of success instead of a climate of excuses for remaining behind. Being intentionally focused on the strengths of these young men, instead of their weaknesses, and identifying their academic gaps can result in recapturing lost potential. The results of these steps and strategies may lead to academic success, not only for group members, but for the entire school and community.

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