Brothers in Excellence: An Empowerment Model for the Career Development of African American Boys

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The author describes Brothers in Excellence (BE), a conceptual model for understanding African American boys and helping them to be successful. BE addresses 3 domains of development proposed to be essential to the success of all African American boys: identity development, social development, and career development.

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Beginning in kindergarten, African American boys experience threats to their success even before they are developmentally able to perceive or counteract them. Although some children, regardless of ethnicity, could be retained, suspended, or expelled at some point from kindergarten through 12th grade, in public schools, African American boys experience these forms of punishment disproportionately (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). Over the course of their primary through secondary education, 23% of African American boys have repeated a grade, 24% have been suspended, and 7% are expelled compared with 12%, 14.9%, and 2.9%, respectively, for the total male student population. These experiences often lead to school incompletion, unemployment, and low annual earnings prospects (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

When intergenerational information is taken into account, the career development process, inclusive of educational preparation, can be understood to begin before birth and certainly well before kindergarten. At birth, the contextual stage of the individual is fairly set and includes socioeconomic status, family net worth, parental educational attainment, parental careers, neighborhood, and school system (Gottfredson, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). Children born to college-educated parents who have viable careers, with salaries that afford them the opportunity to live in a safe neighborhood with appropriately funded and supported schools, begin their lives rich in career development resources. Because children cannot determine their early career development circumstances, their initial success is clearly

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the responsibility and ethical obligation of the adults and professionals entrusted with their care, guidance, and education.

A strong academic foundation will enhance African American boys' opportunities for achievement and success in life (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003). This principle is one of several forces driving considerable research on topics related to the achievement gap and similar race-structured educational issues (Davis, 2003). Although educational initiatives responsibly attend to discrepancies in achievement that are based on race, policy makers and educators are irresponsible in their incessant focus on the gap (Connolly, 2006). Excellence in achievement should be the ethical standard for students, rather than whether the academic performance of students of color matches that of their White American peers. Otherwise, students are forced to operate in an achievement gradient that makes students of color vulnerable to stereotype threat (Steele, 1997). Conversely, in the context of the achievement gap, White American and some Asian students are vulnerable to ideas of academic superiority and merited privilege, ideas that are enabled by a historically racist U.S. social system.

The purpose of this article is to describe Brothers in Excellence (BE), a conceptual model (see Figure 1) for understanding African American boys and helping them to be successful. It is distinctive in its attention and response to the unique social reality of African American males in the United States and the inherent challenges to success that membership in this social demographic group presents. Relevant literature supports BEs developmental and preventive conceptualization of the empowerment of African American boys.

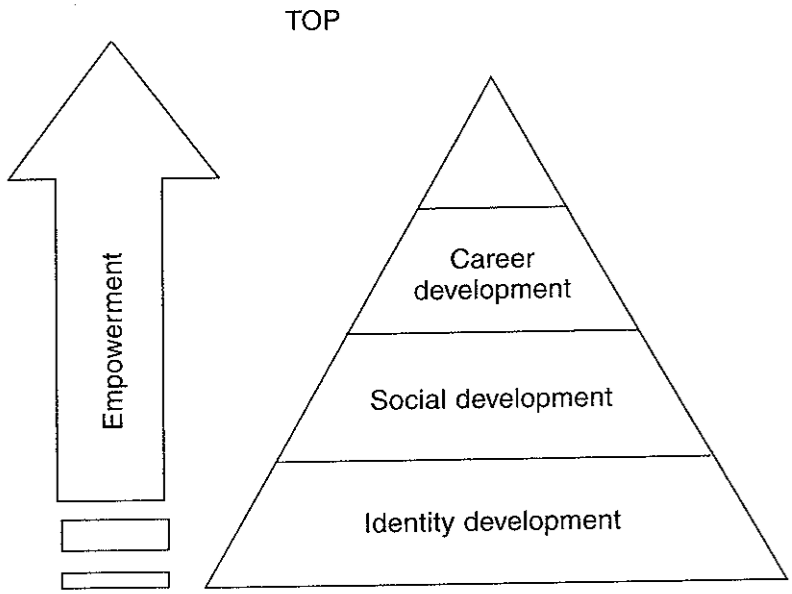

FIGURE 1

Brothers in Excellence Conceptual Model

THE BE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

BE addresses three domains of development that are proposed to be essential to the success of all African American boys: identity development, social development, and career development. *Success* is defined broadly, dimensionally, and longitudinally. It encompasses all aspects of life for an African American boy: home, school, and extracurricular activities.

Identity Development

African American boys need to be equipped with an identity that affirms and empowers them. The development of a healthy identity is spoiled by deficient or inaccurate historical information (Guthrie, 2004), familial discord (Boyd-Franklin, 2003), or negative media portrayals (Fujioka, 2005). Racism also bears some responsibility for negative perceptions of African American boys that manipulate their efforts to be successful (Gayles, 2006). Racial perceptions and associated beliefs pose a stable contextual threat to their success (Davis, 2006; Lent et al., 2000). The prominent discourse in the field of education related to African American boys centers on apparent academic and behavioral problems they disparately experience when compared with peer social demographic groups (Noguera, 2003).

Many helping professionals, members of their social community, and African American boys themselves, adopt commercial images and messages of young African American male identity. Perceived African American male membership in the United States, by default, has associated ideologies (Davis, 2006). The social perception of an African American boy can be characterized practically in the following ways: (a) His potential to be an athlete or criminal is more apparent than is his potential to be an academic scholar or president; (b) his interests center on athletics and entertainment more so than on his interests in humanities, business, science, or technology; (c) his behavior is more likely to be rude, disrespectful, and unkind than it is to be courteous, respectful, and kind; and (d) his tendency is to be violently impulsive and reactive, rather than to provide safety, assistance, and understanding. The following description of a regularly televised national commercial illustrates these points.

An Alltel wireless commercial depicts TK, a tall, approximately 20-year-old, African American male athlete dressed in a jogging suit and sunglasses and his White American male agent dressed in a business suit, at a business meeting with White American male representatives of various cell phone providers. In the commercial, TK is portrayed as a mute, grumbling human being, deficient in effective interpersonal skills. He spends most of the meeting fixated on the cell phone in his hand and pressing buttons (i.e., like a child who needs to be entertained as the adults take care of the business at hand), while his agent articulately expresses his needs and expectations. As the meeting is ending, one of the cell phone provider representatives

accidentally damages the look-alike TK bobblehead doll that his agent has brought to display on the table at the meeting. At this time, TK finally looks up from his cell phone, rises from his seat, and grumbles, "TK's gonna hurt somebody!" as he lunges toward the representative. The negative messages about African American males conveyed in this short commercial are both socially acceptable and destructive (Ward, 2004).

The healthy identity development of African American boys has at least two necessary conditions. First, spiritual-humanistic development cultivates a healthy identity in African American boys and helps to disarm harmful personal, interpersonal, and societal messages. *Spiritual* refers to the nonphysical essence of a human being (Myers, 1993). The process of intentional spiritual–humanistic development imparts three basic principles to the African American boy: (a) He is valuable (Rogers, 1961)—all human beings have inherent value; (b) he has intrinsic abilities (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996)—the abilities of living human beings allow purposeful behavior; (c) his life has purpose (KunJufu, 1986)—the purpose of his life is rooted in his inherent value and intrinsic abilities. It is the responsibility, then, of caregivers and helping professionals to nurture spiritual development, which transcends race, class, gender, and even culture and protects against boundaries imposed by his apparent social reality.

Cultural development is the second condition for healthy identity development (KunJufu, 1986; Warfield-Coppock, 1992). African American boys are multicultural. They, like all human beings, are amalgams resulting from the dynamic influence of many cultures, which include their family, race, ethnicity, neighborhood, church, school, society, and history or ancestry (Cross & Cross, 2008). Each of these different cultures contributes to their worldview and behavior. To be most effective, educators and helping professionals need cultural knowledge about the African American boys with whom they work (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Cultural knowledge helps professionals to appreciate the worldviews, expectations, beliefs, and values demonstrated by African Americans boys and to recognize similar and dissimilar contextual factors that have influenced their individual self-concepts, relationship with others, and understandings of their social environment. Without the intentional use of cultural information, challenges inherent to a restrictive social system will continue to be unjustly described as problems essentially innate to African American boys.

Social Development

In addition to a healthy identity, African American boys must cultivate interpersonal and analytical thinking skills (Taylor, 2003). Interpersonal skills are necessary to communicate effectively with peers and adults. Analytical thinking skills are necessary for them to make accurate judgments and decisions within their social environments. In my professional and clinical work with schools and agencies, I have noted that African American boys

with adept interpersonal skills are usually perceived as smart, skilled, and capable by the adults, educators, and counselors who work with them. Conversely, when African American boys have limited interpersonal skill sets, they are likely to experience greater social problems.

In a neighborhood setting, for example, specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., coded speech, casual attire) are appropriate and effective because of the social cultural context in which they are used. In an academic setting and later in life in a professional setting, however, certain behaviors may need to be contextually adapted (Greene & Walker, 2004). The analytical skills to know what behaviors to use and when to use them, and the interpersonal skills to do so effectively are essential success tools for African American boys.

In summary, African American boys must be taught analytical and interpersonal skills to facilitate their social development. They will be judged immediately for how they are able to handle themselves in particular situations; how they interact with others; and how they respond to challenges, dilemmas, and unfair circumstances. It is important, therefore, for them to have an understanding of the social cost of their perceived race and behavior. Their healthy identity development, however, must not be undermined by their burgeoning social knowledge; rather, such knowledge should facilitate their empowerment, social competence, and interpersonal effectiveness.

Career Development

The basic mechanisms for the successful career development of African American boys are the relationships that they have with the adults and peers in their lives (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; D'Andrea, 1995; Harvey & Hill, 2004; Steinburg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Success is related to the strength of adaptive relationships (AR) and the strength of maladaptive relationships (MR). A formula to help conceptualize the relationship factor can be expressed as,

$$S = (AR_a + AR_p) + (MR_a + MR_p).$$

For this formula, the strength of the relationship, adaptive or maladaptive, is determined by the relative power it has to mutually influence the African American boy and the adults($_a$) or peers($_p$) involved in the relationship. A high-strength relationship is influential, and a low-strength relationship has little influential power. The relative values of the relationship variables (AR_a, AR_p, MR_a, MR_p) have the potential to change over time, which directly and indirectly affects the successful career development of African American boys.

When the collective strength of adaptive relationships, initially with adults (e.g., parents, relatives, community members) and subsequently

with peers (e.g., friends, classmates) is relatively more powerful than the collective strength of maladaptive relationships (assigned a negative value in the conceptual formula), a successful outcome (i.e., positive sum) is the likely result. Even when environmental and situational circumstances are taken into account, relationship type and strength remain the determining factors. This formula regarding relationships attempts to explain in basic concepts how African American boys from similar backgrounds can ultimately have contrasting life outcomes. Conversely, it can explain how African American boys from dissimilar backgrounds can have comparable life outcomes. A relationship map, then, inclusive of type and strength, can be a useful tool in success determination. A data analysis from a large sample of ethnically diverse high school students by Steinburg et al. (1992) revealed, "across all ethnic groups, youngsters whose friends and parents both support achievement perform better than those who receive support from one source, but not the other, who in turn perform better than those who receive no support from either" (p. 727).

Adaptive relationships with adults are characterized as those that educate and train African American boys, as they grow into adolescence and adulthood, rooted in and nurtured by (a) positive expectations to achieve and succeed (i.e., academically, socially, and occupationally); (b) consistent encouragement and support to develop their potential and to engage learning and career development opportunities; (c) emphasis on the importance of educational excellence for career success and personal fulfillment; and (d) exposure to diverse social, cultural, and career experiences that enhance their worldview and help them to develop new interests and aspirations (Grimmett, 2006). It is important to note that it is not the presence of an adaptive relationship or the number of such relationships, but rather the strength of the relationship that is the significant factor as it relates to their achievement and success. Alliman-Brissett et al. (2004) found that career-related modeling by parents of African American boys in the eighth grade was the strongest predictor of their career self-efficacy (e.g., confidence in career planning and exploration, transitioning from school to career, career decision making, and positive career decision-making expectations).

The role of peers in adaptive relationships is similar to that of adults, except their primary role is supportive, rather than to educate or to train. For example, an adaptive peer relationship would promote commitment to school, academic achievement, and involvement in extracurricular activities. Shin, Daly, and Vera (2007) found that inner-city middle school students of color who indicated having higher levels of positive peer norms tended to report higher school engagement when compared with students who indicated lower levels of positive peer norms.

African American boys involved in maladaptive relationships with adults and peers, conversely, experience identity distortion and confusion, underachievement, and disempowerment (Mangino, 2009; Stearns, Dodge,

& Nicholson, 2008; Tatum, 2003). They also lack social, cultural, and career awareness, knowledge, and skills. Expectations for their achievement and success are low, negative, inconsistent, or nonexistent (Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). There is only minimal encouragement to develop their potential, because it is not truly acknowledged by the adults or peers in their lives. Educational excellence is not viewed as being in the realm of possibility, therefore, mediocrity and poor performance become the achieved goals (Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003). Steinburg et al. (1992) found that "for African-American youngsters, the benefits to schooling [i.e., achievement] . . . of authoritative parenting [warm, firm, and democratic] . . . are offset by the lack of support for academic excellence that they enjoy from peers" (p. 728). Finally, African American boys who experience maladaptive relationships are rarely provided any real opportunities to experience life outside of their respective social spaces, including their neighborhood and accessible media (e.g., television, radio, video games, social [inter]networking), for it to meaningfully enter their reality. Again, if the maladaptive relationships are of high strength, they will ultimately have a negative influence on the career development of African American boys. In summary, when African American boys have strong adaptive relationships with adults and peers, relative to the potentially maladaptive relationships in their lives, successful career development is achieved.

IMPLICATIONS

Adults and helping professionals who work with African American boys need to believe that all children are capable of educational and career success (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Grimmett & Paisley, 2008). An African American boy who is interested and engaged in learning and achievement should not be considered exceptional for this alone. His interest and engagement, rather, should be understood as the predictable outcomes of caregivers, educators, helping professionals, and other concerned adults who nurtured his healthy identity development. Children cannot be expected to advocate for and empower themselves; yet they can, even if on a primal, unconscious, spiritual level, have the reasonable expectation that the individuals who are entrusted with their care will do all they can to prepare them to be successful.

The methods and processes used to facilitate identity, spiritual–humanistic, and cultural development can be as comprehensive and varied as needed. Practical strategies to be included in all interventions are the consistent and authentic use of (a) affirmations related to potential, abilities, and skills; (b) commendations related to effort and achievement; and (c) respect that is independent of worldview or behavior (i.e., the demonstration of respect toward children in all circumstances provides a healthy social model). These approaches help to cultivate empathy and compassion, which provide an internal structure for self-respect and respect for others.

Cultural development is facilitated by physical environments, curricular content, educational policies, family processes, professionals, and caregivers that demonstrate multiculturalism, build and/or respect diversity, and systematically assess for appropriate cultural representation in all relevant contexts (Banks & Banks, 2007). An African American boy who attends an ethnically and culturally diverse (i.e., among the administration, faculty, and students) elementary school that demonstrates positive educational expectations for all of its students and that has the faculty and resources to meet their needs has access to an academic culture conducive to success.

In the social development domain, three components of communication thought to significantly shape the success trajectory of African American boys are briefly addressed: appearance, speech (i.e., verbal communication skills), and writing. *Appearance* can be defined as nonverbal communication that often provides the first information about an individual to the public. It is important for African American boys to understand the social implications of their appearance. This does not mean that they need to adopt any standardized dress code or to necessarily become more sensitized to their physical appearance; instead, social awareness and cursory knowledge about what attire is expected in particular contexts are beneficial. In schools, for example, a uniform may be required, and on a job interview, it may be customary for men to wear a tie. At all times, they should be encouraged to think critically about what they should wear in particular situations, rather than being given a prescription for how to dress. The emphasis should be on helping them to (a) make an informed choice about the message they are hoping to communicate through their appearance, (b) understand the implications of that choice, and (c) realize that the message they hope to communicate may not be received as they intended. Critical thinking questions may include the following: What style of dress do you consider appropriate for a job interview? Do you think your style of dress affects the employer's decision to hire you? If you were an employer, would you consider the appearance (e.g., style of dress, hairstyle) of a person before you hired them?

Verbal and written communication skills are considered together briefly. In social settings, appearance, speech, and conversational content provide information from which individuals make judgments about one another regarding intelligence, education, nationality, and socioeconomic status (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Developmental proficiency in reading (i.e., oral and comprehension), writing, and speaking are essential tools for the career development and success of all children (Chatterji, 2006). Therefore, careful assessment and training are required in elementary school to ensure that African American boys are able to perform these tasks at the developmentally appropriate level (Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004; Washington, 2001). The negative consequences of underdeveloped reading, writing, and oratorical skills are evident over the life span and are only exacerbated for African American boys in the United States (Davis, 2003).

The successful career development of African American boys, then, requires that adult professionals, organizations, and institutions who work with them directly or on their behalf (a) identify and understand their own destructive socialized perceptions of African American boys; (b) develop balanced, dimensional, and contextual understandings of the individual African American boys with or for whom they work; (c) assess, identify, confront, and deconstruct harmful ideologies adopted and internalized by African American boys; (d) equip African American boys to function constructively in their individual and social realities for their empowerment and success through identity, social, and career development; and (e) advocate for accurate information and portrayals of African American males in schools, communities, research studies, social policy, and all forms of media. Finally, adaptive relationships with adults and peers, as well as protection against maladaptive relationships, will provide African American boys with meaningful connections, models, and support needed to live their lives successfully.

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