

# Rite of Passage Programs as Effective Tools for Fostering Resilience Among Low-Income African American Male Adolescents

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*The authors discuss effective rite of passage (ROP) programs as strength-based, culturally relevant interventions for African American male adolescents. They also highlight the ethnocultural strengths of this population from a resilience perspective and articulate academic and dispositional outcomes of ROP programs. Recommendations for practice and future research are included.*

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Despite major efforts since the *Brown v. Board of Educ.* (1954) decision, African American students, male students in particular, continue to lag behind their European American counterparts in academic achievement (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). As early as the third grade, African American students demonstrate significantly lower performance in reading, mathematics, and science as compared with their European American, Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander peers (NCES, 2002). As a group, African American students constituted roughly 14.8% of public school enrollment in 1998, yet compared with their European American counterparts, were disproportionately identified and placed in categories such as mental retardation (18.9%), specific learning disability (45.2%), and emotional disturbance (10.7%; NCES, 2001). Disproportionality also permeates decisions regarding which children are identified and placed in programs for the gifted and talented in

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U.S. public schools, with African American students being half as likely to be represented in such programs as compared with their European American peers (3.04% and 7.47%, respectively; National Research Council, 2002).

The majority of research investigating low-income, African American male adolescents has been problem focused, spotlighting symptoms rather than root causes. Some scholars have criticized the negative approaches that have investigated interpersonal violence and aggression (Hammond & Yung, 1991), dropout rates (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997), crime and delinquency (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994), and chronic underachievement (Osborne, 1999). Fueling this pejorative view of African American male youth is the persistent and pervasive depiction of this population within the media that highlights the symptomatology of their sociopolitical realities as inherent, and sometimes even genetic, flaws (DeFilippis & Derby, 1980; Newkirk, 2000).

Remedial responses to low-income African American male adolescents' persistent underachievement have included compensatory programs (Lange & Lehr, 1999), school-based intervention strategies (Bullis, Walker, & Sprague, 2001), referrals to alternative educational settings (Foley & Pang, 2006), and mentoring programs (Tierney & Grossman, 2000). Adding to this shortcoming is the minimal discussion of the strengths of this population, thereby contributing further to stigmatization (McMillan, 2003; Miller, 1999).

Resilience theory (Seccombe, 2002) provides a useful lens for investigating the challenges and strengths influencing the educational achievement of low-income African American male adolescents because of its focus on risk and protective factors. The intent of this article is to highlight the strengths of low-income African American male adolescents and to articulate the academic and dispositional outcomes of rite of passage (ROP) programs for this population as a strength-based intervention. ROP programs are strength-based, culturally relevant interventions that have been effective with this population (Brookins, 1996; Brooks, West-Olatunji, & Baker, 2005; Harvey & Rauch, 1997; Jeff, 1994).

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Many of the early interventions with African American students stemmed from a cultural deprivation theory (DeFilippis & Derby, 1980; Rowe & Os-good, 1984) and served to identify individual deficits in order to respond with remediation. In particular, African American boys in public schools continue to be recipients of deficit-focused remediation (McMillan, 2003). Unfortunately, remedial interventions often fail to incorporate the inherent strengths of these youth and, thus, have not significantly changed these students' educational trajectory. Contemporary scholars have been quick to criticize individual deficit-oriented frameworks, especially when applied to low-income African American male youth, because they fail to address the prevailing sociopolitical conditions (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007;

Arredondo & Toporek, 2004; West-Olatunji & Watson, 1999) that would necessitate advocacy on the part of counseling professionals seeking to intervene.

### *Current Attempts to Address Underachievement*

*Compensatory education programs.* More than 3 decades of compensatory education in the United States have been fueled by Title I funds to address the achievement gap between students in impoverished communities and their more advantaged peers (McDill & Natriello, 1998). Although some positive outcomes have been noted, compensatory education programs have by and large failed to serve as a model for ameliorating the effects of poverty on the academic outcomes of at-risk youth (Lange & Lehr, 1999). More recent studies suggest that culturally sensitive (Beck, 1999; Hamovitch, 1999) and comprehensive school-wide approaches show promise as effective strategies with low-income, culturally diverse students (McDill & Natriello, 1998).

*School-based intervention strategies.* Although there has been some limited success with school-based interventions, the traditional approach wherein professional counselors are reactive and remediation-oriented has not sufficiently served the school community's needs (Patton et al., 2000). In attempting to address maladaptive behaviors among students who are symptomatic, school counselors and psychologists have used intervention strategies, such as programs for drug usage and antisocial activity, with confounding results (Bullis et al., 2001). What has emerged is a belief that interventions involving student engagement and input can have positive outcomes for school-wide programming. Moreover, when counselors integrate culturally appropriate practices, they can enhance their effectiveness (Elliott, Orr, Watson, & Jackson, 2005).

*Alternative education programs.* Emerging from a need to separate disruptive students from performing students, primarily at the middle and high school levels, alternative education programs provide specialized interventions for an at-risk population of students (Foley & Pang, 2006). McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, and McWhirter (1995) defined *at risk* as an implied set of presumed cause-effect dynamics that place an individual child or adolescent in danger of experiencing negative future events, such as low socioeconomic status, membership in an ethnic minority group, and evidence of psychosocial stressors (e.g., parental divorce, family income loss, and the death of a loved one).

As such, alternative education programs seek to address students' instructional and behavioral concerns (Powell, 2003). Varying widely in setting, teaching strategies, curriculum used, and student demographics, alternative education programs serve approximately 2% of the overall U.S. student population (Van Acker, 2007). Unfortunately, to date, these programs lack sufficient empirical support for their effectiveness (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

Moreover, the current trend to create boot camp experiences further supports the pejorative view of African American male adolescents and has had limited success with this population (Associated Press, 1998).

*Mentoring programs.* The public and social service communities continue to stress the value of adult men as mentors and role models for economically disadvantaged and at-risk youth as well as for youth who, for whatever reasons, do not have an involved father (Freedman, 1999). One such program that has national recognition is the Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BBBS) program. BBBS was built on the premise that adults can foster the personal development of youth by exposing them to new and healthy opportunities and increasing their community-based social capital while also providing them with educational support and an adult friend. Although little is known about how adults actually influence the lives of young people, an investigation (Tierney & Grossman, 2000) of the outcomes of the BBBS program has shown that youth could be affected positively in various ways by a systematically implemented mentoring intervention.

One characteristic missing from the aforementioned interventions has been an intentional focus on the strengths of the youth served. African American male youth are part and parcel of the collective historical and cultural experiences of African American families. Thus, they bring a rich set of coping skills and abilities that are untapped and underutilized within the educational environment (Brooks et al., 2005). In order for counselors to develop more culture-centered interventions, they may need to augment their multicultural knowledge, awareness, and skills in relation to African American male adolescent clients and become advocates on their behalf (Toporek, Ortega-Villalobos, & Pope-Davis, 2004).

### *Resilience Theory and Impoverished Families*

Resilience theory is grounded in a belief about individuals' abilities to prosper in the face of hardship and offers the perspective that individuals need adequate support structures within family and community networks (Seccombe, 2002). Counselors who work with African American families can use a strength-based perspective (Amatea, Smith-Adcock, & Villares, 2006) to allow them to better understand the ways that African American families have persisted despite personal and institutional obstacles. Moreover, the low-income status of many African American parents typically means that they may have less time to be involved in their children's education because of work demands and transportation concerns (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Thus, they may develop different strategies to support their children's education. Recent studies have shown that resilience factors for low-income families are evidenced by healthy family communication, access to economic resources, and social networks of support (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004).

## *African American Values and Schooling*

It has been reported that much of the achievement gap between African American students and their European American counterparts can be attributed to the cultural discontinuity between mainstream Eurocentric values embedded in the curriculum and contrasting values within the African American family (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Distinguishable from mainstream Eurocentric values, African American culture reflects a reality in which knowing is experienced through emotion or feeling (i.e., knowledge is acquired through affect and experience). Also highly valued within the African American culture are interpersonal relationships, thus, African Americans are considered to be sociocentric (Schiele, 1994). These values are in contrast to the Western worldview that permeates the U.S. educational system (Banks, 1998; Grant & Lei, 2001).

The contrast in values and expectations between the Eurocentric values in public schools and those of culturally diverse families has been thought to be a major factor in the discord felt by students trapped between these two worlds (Banks, 1998; Grant & Lei, 2001). Moreover, scholars have asserted that the home culture informs students' diverse patterns of language, behavior, and learning styles (Hale-Benson, 1986; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). The nuclear family, individualism, and specific role definitions within the family often permeate dominant culture families (Tutweiler, 2005). Nondominant cultures, such as African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American/Indian families, tend to focus on an extended family structure, group orientation, and flexible familial roles (Atkinson, 2004). Culturally diverse families often emphasize extended family units that include not only related family members but can also consist of unrelated members, known as fictive kin (West-Olatunji, 2008). In coping with systemic oppression, intergenerational family units can provide collective economic, social, and emotional resources (Nobles, 1986; Sudarkasa, 1997). This is especially evident within the African American community.

For African Americans, resilience is reflected by a sense of control, self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping, and spirituality (Waller, 2001). Some identified familial resiliency factors are support, role models, close family bonds and mutual aid, involvement, warmth, and consistency (McCabe, Clark, & Barnett, 1999; Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Zapert, & Maton, 2000). Moreover, community cohesion and alignment with organizations that provide resources are considered to be systemic protective factors for this population (Jarrett, 1997). Resilience, therefore, can be seen in the strong sense of self and appreciation of African American youth for their own cultural and ethnic background. Personal and cultural identity development encourages self-esteem, apart from external societal factors that often serve to marginalize this population. Multicultural counseling scholars have long held that a focus on culture and working with clients from their cultural

context is an expedient and effective way to work with diverse populations (Ivey & Pedersen, 1993).

ROP programs embody key resilience factors for African American youth at the familial, educational, and community levels. Within the context of family dynamics, ROP programs provide support and resources for vulnerable families. ROP programs also complement students' instruction by providing tutoring, culturally relevant course content, and cultural excursions. At the community level, ROP programs serve as a bridge between community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, and community agencies to enhance systemic support.

## ROP PROGRAMS

ROP programs are strength-based, culture-centered approaches that uniquely focus on the strengths of marginalized youth. Holistic in nature, ROP programs contain several components: community involvement, positive role models, collective instruction, cultural and personal identity development, high expectations, safe and supportive environment, and an emphasis on purpose and achievement. ROP programs strive to help participants develop a strong positive sense of self, community, and achievement (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). These programs support the idea that boys do not become men when they reach a certain age. Rather, boys become men when they learn the skills deemed necessary by the community to become successful adults (Jeff, 1994). These developmental skills are gained through culturally relevant instruction, creative expression through arts, self-knowledge and self-control through the martial arts, moral and spiritual development, and community-building exercises (West-Olatunji, Baker, & Brooks, 2006). Students are taught to be intentional and proactive rather than reactive. A focus on self-control, creative expression, moral and personal development, communication skills, and problem-solving skills provide them with the resources necessary to feel a sense of civic responsibility, allowing them to engage in the community.

One of the hallmarks of ROP programs, in fact, is the emphasis on student involvement in the community. Typically, a group of productive, responsible, and successful men and women from the community serve as elders within a ROP program, acting as role models and contributing to the instruction and ceremonies in the ROP process (Brooks et al., 2005). Such involvement by adults establishes a link between the students in the program with the community. This cohesion between the program and the community can also demonstrate to students how academic achievement is relevant to their community and their lives and ensures students' cultural knowledge. Such a link fosters increased engagement with the community because it validates who they are and where they come from, as opposed to many public school environments that all too frequently emphasize Eurocentric ideals and educational values (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Boykin, 2001).

ROP programs seek to teach youth to become aware of their personal and group cultural identity and have a high sense of responsibility for the well-being and harmonious interconnection between self and community (Brooks et al., 2005).

To buffer against the cultural hegemony typically embedded in schooling experiences, ROP programs tend to employ African American teachers and mentors as positive images of African Americans as an essential program component. This element aids in enhancing self-esteem and facilitates cultural identity development among students. It should be noted that positive images and role models based on gender and class are also used.

Collective instruction is used to aid young men in becoming morally and culturally grounded, educationally capable, and socially committed. Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005) suggested the communal value present in African American culture makes collaborative and collective learning formats more engaging for these students. Moore et al. also pointed out that the competitive and individualistic nature of many public school classrooms are sources of disengagement and cultural conflict. Working together in an environment that validates who they are helps African American youth to develop their personal and cultural identities. When students learn what is important to them and to their community, they can become self-determined and strive to achieve goals.

High expectations are also a key element in ROP programs for fostering motivation and self-efficacy. When youth are aware that high achievement is expected of them and adults believe that they are capable, they tend to be more motivated and display greater achievement (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). In a study by Wood, Kaplan, and McLoyd (2007), parents' and teachers' positive academic expectations of low-income African American male adolescents served as a protective factor for positive student academic expectations. It seems that influential adults, whether they are parents or teachers, can influence students' expectations of their own achievement. The holistic approach of ROP programs creates an environment that encourages achievement through high expectations.

Congruent with the holistic approach of ROP programs, students are expected to maintain satisfactory school grades and near-perfect school and program attendance and are required to present knowledge of personal growth and cultural history to the community. This is accomplished through the use of rites and rituals. When students gain new knowledge within the program that is deemed important by the elders in the community, rituals are performed to display these accomplishments and the developmental progression before the community. These rituals serve to increase engagement and self-esteem among the students to motivate them to achieve (West-Olatunji et al., 2006).

Ensuring a safe and supportive environment includes maintaining a culturally relevant curriculum that validates who the students are and addresses their individual needs. Attention is given to avoiding the

tangible institutional neglect that is often reflected in the formal, public school system (Foster & Peele, 1999; Polite, 1994). The community and family links established through the program ensure that community values and culture are central in creating a program that uses students' funds of knowledge (denotes the experiential or contextual knowledge that students bring with them into formal classroom settings). Concurrent with learning African American values, students are encouraged to work together and participate in peer mediation and conflict resolution techniques. This encourages students to take some social responsibility in creating a safe environment that supports them through the use of collective instruction and peer mentorship.

Through their engagement of the community and family, emphasis on civic engagement, and focus on self-efficacy and achievement, ROP programs build upon strengths and help protect against the societal factors that serve to marginalize this population. In addition to various positive social and identity factors, a study by Warfield-Coppock (1992) showed improved school behavior, academic performance, and heightened interest in attending postsecondary educational institutions or taking advantage of vocational opportunities as indicators of the success of ROP programs.

Although positive outcomes have been found with the implementation of mentoring programs, ROP goes beyond this unilateral measure by addressing the environmental factors that serve to marginalize these students. Through a culture-centered holistic approach, ROP programs acknowledge and promote the cultural strengths of students, their families, and their communities. Unlike previous and current interventions that have been largely used as reactive, remediation strategies, ROP programs are a preventative measure that shows promise for ameliorating the effects of educational hegemony for low-income African American male adolescents (Warfield-Coppock, 1992; West-Olatunji et al., 2006).

## DISCUSSION

### *Recommendations*

As stated previously, African American youth, especially male adolescents, are lagging behind their European American counterparts in academic achievement. Oftentimes, counselors and educators serve as gatekeepers, deciding which students are placed in enrichment and magnet programs and which ones are placed in special education and remedial behavioral programs (Cartledge, Tillman, & Johnson, 2001). Because this kind of tracking greatly influences achievement in later years and may be influenced by cultural misunderstandings (Harry & Anderson, 1995), counselors must change how they work with low-income, African American male students to use a strength-based, culture-centered framework (Amatea et al., 2006; Ivey & Pedersen, 1993).

First, counselors must strive to become more knowledgeable about African American culture and the sociopolitical realities that African American families experience. Cultural understanding enables counselors to work with diverse populations in a way that validates their experiences (Ivey & Pedersen, 1993). For many counselors, this will necessitate leaving the comfort of their offices and entering into culturally diverse communities. Participating in outreach work, volunteering, and attending cultural events with a community stakeholder are ways to engage in immersion experiences and increase cultural understanding (Ivey & Pedersen, 1993).

It has been suggested that immersion experiences are a crucial component in gaining the multicultural knowledge, skills, and awareness needed to work effectively with diverse populations (Toporek et al., 2004). To work effectively with socially marginalized populations, counselors must have an understanding of the systemic forces that serve to marginalize and stigmatize them, as well as an openness to gaining cultural understanding and appreciation of diverse people. As a step toward greater cultural understanding and appreciation, counselor educators can implement cultural immersion experiences, interviews, activities, and trips in the curriculum for counselor trainees (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002).

Second, at the primary school level, counselors can use ROP programs as prevention tools for African American boys before tracking into special education or remedial behavioral programs can occur. In order to locate and advocate for ROP programs, counselors can develop relationships with community organizations that may be able to locate resources to develop ROP programs or locate existing ROP programs. Counselors, particularly those in the school setting, are said to be overextended in attempting to work with economically disadvantaged populations. By partnering with community organizations to provide supplemental services and culture-centered interventions, counselors can assist low-income African American male youth in developing the coping skills necessary to combat educational hegemony and social marginalization.

### *Future Research*

Although some outcome studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of ROP programs with low-income culturally diverse youth, further research is warranted. Studies that investigate mathematics and science achievement of low-income, African American boys at the primary school level would be informative. Exploring the use of ROP programs with culturally different populations to increase cultural understanding would also provide useful information about this intervention. Additionally, a comparative study of mentoring and ROP programs might inform educational researchers about the differential outcomes of these two programs.

An investigation of the effectiveness of ROP programs with low-income, African American boys at the primary school level as an intervention to increase their mathematics and science achievement would be of benefit.

An astounding number of students, especially at the middle and high school levels, are alienated by mathematics and science disciplines despite the fact that these two subjects play an increasingly significant role in contemporary life, at both a personal and societal level. Although each level of schooling has its own unique challenges, as early as the primary grades, schoolchildren are predisposed to having an interest or a lack thereof in mathematics and science. This study would investigate the role of an ROP program in advancing mathematics and science achievement among low-income, African American boys in the elementary grade years. ROP programs may be an effective intervention in fostering self-determination, self-efficacy, and mathematics and science achievement.

Another beneficial study would be to design a ROP program for different cultural groups to investigate multicultural competence and appreciation. Such an investigation could focus on cultural, ability, sexual identity, or religious diversity. By providing contact and activity in a safe, supportive environment, data could be gathered on the interactions and outcomes of these experiences for students to increase cultural awareness.

Finally, it would be beneficial for a comparative study to be conducted, using an experimental design, to explore the effects of after-school mentoring and ROP programs on the academic performance of African American boys in middle school. In general, more rigorously designed studies are needed in this area. Using a large population sample, researchers could examine resilience, cultural identity, academic achievement, and engagement between two schools—one using a mentoring program, such as the BBBS program, and the other using a ROP program.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the achievement gap between African American students and their European American counterparts is still substantial despite efforts to close it. Previous attempts to focus on this have taken a deficit-oriented view of African American male youth. Implicit in the plethora of deficit-focused literature, funding of remedial tactics, and related negative media depictions of African American male youth is the absence of a focus on the strengths and resilience of this population. ROP programs have been used successfully to increase academic achievement largely because they build upon known strengths of these youth, thus linking students, families, and their communities to the educational experience.

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