

Emancipatory Education Versus School-Based Prevention in African American Communities

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Schools have become strategic settings for the work of community psychologists. In a review of 177 primary prevention programs for children and adolescents, Durlak and Wells (1997) found that 129 (72.9%) were based in schools. The literature in community psychology describes many school-based prevention programs targeting problems such as substance abuse, school "maladjustment," delinquency, and violence (e.g. C. A. Mason, A. M. Cauce, L. Robinson & G. W. Harper, 1999). A large number of these programs are based in schools in African American communities and include social-cognitive, decision making, affective education, and other skills-building modules along with direct instruction. In this paper, it is argued that ideas from emancipatory education (e.g. Freire, 1998) and African-centered education (e.g. H. Madhubuti & S. Madhubuti, 1994; M. J. Shujaa, 1995) should guide school-based interventions in communities of people of African descent. There is an extensive and distinguished history of emancipatory schools and school-based programs in African American communities. Included in this history are the freedom schools during reconstruction, the SNCC Freedom Schools, the Liberation Schools of the Black Panther Party, the Malcolm X Academy in Detroit, Sankofa Shule in Lansing, the Institute for Positive Education/New Concept Development Center in Chicago, the Benjamin E. Mays Institute in Hartford, and the schools affiliated with the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) to name just a few. This paper will first provide a brief, critical review of the role of schools and social oppression. Second, primary prevention programs in communities of people of African descent will be examined, questioning some of the dominant methods and assumptions. Next, underlying assumptions about relationships between African identity, educational success, and healthy outcomes for young people will be addressed. This will be followed by a discussion of African-centered emancipatory education, focusing specifically on the role of students as agents of social change and the importance of critical reflection on African cultural resources. The Benjamin E. Mays Institute will be presented as an example of how ideas from an African-centered emancipatory approach to education have been incorporated within a school serving a community of people of African descent in Hartford, Connecticut.

KEY WORDS: African-centered education; Africentric education; critical pedagogy; emancipatory education and school-based prevention.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL OPPRESSION

As the vast majority of primary prevention programs for children and adolescents are based in schools, it would be worthwhile to clarify the

relationship between schools and oppression. Social oppression may be a source of the problems these programs seek to prevent. The definition of oppression used here is based on that provided by Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999), which describes oppression as both a state and process. As a state, oppression is reflected in pervasive social asymmetries, which include the unequal distribution of essential resources, inequities in educational attainment,

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employment opportunities, and life expectancies. As a process, oppression involves institutional and cultural systems of domination that marginalize, demonize, and rob the target group of dignity. These structures of domination are reinforced in day-to-day transactions such as racial profiling, police violence, social discourse (Moore, 1998; Smitherman-Donaldson & Van Dijk, 1988), academic discourse (Van Dijk, 1993), and social science research (Iijima Hall, 1997; Smith, 1999). It is important for us to consider the ways in which schools may function as part of the process of social oppression, or serve to subvert this process.

In a society stratified by race, class, and gender, schools are by no means politically neutral. Schools have been described as major socializing mechanisms that help maintain existing hierarchical relationships of power and privilege (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Shujaa, 1995).

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to enculturate the young into the logic of the present system, or it is the means of dealing critically and creatively with reality to discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire & Macedo, cited in Murrell, 1997, p. 19)

Social reproduction is one theory that describes schooling in capitalist societies as serving to reproduce structures of social inequality from one generation to the next. In their historical analysis of public education in the United States, Bowles and Gintis (1976) provide data that challenge the presumed egalitarian nature of schooling. Examining enduring differentials in resources devoted to students, internal school structures, content of schooling, pupil evaluation, and tracking, Bowles and Gintis assert that schooling plays a pivotal role in the process of social oppression. The structural asymmetries in society are reflected in inequities in school funding. For example, in New York State, the richest school district spends seven times more per student than the poorest school district. In Illinois that ratio is eight to one, and in Texas ten to one (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Social reproduction theory describes how schools may contribute to the process of social oppression, and provides a framework for apprehending the *Savage Inequalities* in education that Kozol (1991) describes so poignantly. Structured inequality in education not only exists between schools, but even within a given school. In *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, Oakes (1986) found that teachers of “high-track” students set aside more class time for student learning activities, and taught critical

thinking, creativity, and independence. Students in the “lower-tracks” were denied access to these educationally and socially important experiences, and teachers spent more time on discipline. Students in “lower-track” classes perceived their teachers as more punitive. And across all “tracks,” curricula perpetuate oppression by marginalizing voices, histories, values, and experiences of oppressed groups; emphasizing the “classics” and canons of the hegemonic culture; instilling values consistent with the status quo (e.g. individualism, competition, etc.); and ignoring issues such as colonialism and racism.

More specifically in regard to students of African descent, Ogbu (1978) suggests that not only are class hierarchies reproduced through schooling inequities, but “caste” hierarchies as well. Ogbu examined the specific schooling differences experienced by those who are members of caste minority groups—those against whom there have been histories of enslavement or territorial conquest, and ideologies of inherent inferiority. Ogbu found that caste minorities such as African Americans in the United States, West Indians in Great Britain, and Maoris in New Zealand are subject to similar patterns of school failure, dropout, and placement in “special education” classrooms. For example, Ogbu reported that 25% of all West Indian children in London were in classes for the “retarded,” and in the borough of Brent, 70% of the children in a secondary school for the “educationally subnormal” were West Indian (pp. 249–250). In the United States, school practices such as standardized testing and systems of tracking, labeling, and ranking disproportionately assign African American students to “slower” tracks, lower ranks, and groups with labels of deviance (e.g. “E.D.,” “B.D.,” “L.D.,” “E.M.R.,” etc.).

They are disproportionately expelled, suspended, and relegated to special programs for the emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, and mentally retarded. They have dramatically higher drop-out rates, yet dramatically lower grade point averages and rates of matriculation. . . . Can schooling for African American children ever be more than institutional indoctrination into a social system and American culture that reproduces, reinforces and fortifies the devaluation of African American people? (Murrell, 1997, p. 23)

According to Voelkl (1996) and Hare and Castenell (1985) problems such as tracking into low-ability groups, and being held in low academic regard by teachers are especially acute for male students of African descent.

Schools, the institutional settings in which prevention programs are most often based, may serve to reinforce the structures of inequality that engender the very problems these programs seek to prevent. The process of oppression is served not only through school patterns of inequity described above but also through the dissemination alongside of these inequities a message to students and parents that academic achievement is based strictly upon “natural ability” and merit. Academic achievement, in turn, is a major rationale for inequities in employment. Schools thereby play a major role in reinforcing asymmetries in the occupational structure, socializing those at the lower levels of this structure to believe that they have only themselves to blame.

Although mainstream schooling may serve to reproduce social asymmetries, emancipatory education challenges these asymmetries. An emancipatory African-centered model of education is defined here as one that (1) explicitly addresses social oppression, situating community problems (and targets of primary prevention) within historical context, (2) acknowledges students as agents for social change, and (3) affirms African cultural resources for healing and social transformation. Emancipatory education seeks to invoke the liberatory potential of education for children and society. African-centered emancipatory education affirms identity and agency, helps restore a sense of history, and provides opportunities for social action.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PREVENTION IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

School-based prevention programs mostly target problems such as substance abuse, school “maladjustment,” teen pregnancy, delinquency, and violence through person-centered and environmental programs (Durlak & Wells, 1997; Mason et al., 1999). Person-centered models make use of direct instruction as well as social-cognitive, decision making, and other skills-building techniques adapted from the clinical and counseling literature. Most environmental prevention programs seek to modify child-rearing techniques or classroom management strategies as opposed to seeking change at the community or societal level (Durlak & Wells, 1997). The main problems with these school-based prevention programs that target the cognitive skills of children, instructional techniques of their teachers, and parenting skills of their parents are the assumptions and values upon which

they are based. As is mainstream North American psychology generally, these programs may often be founded on positivism, ahistoricism, and individualism (Martín-Baró, 1994).

Data and positive facts on school failure, violence, and substance abuse do not tell the whole story of the cultural experience of children of African descent, nor of the structures and processes that sustain these circumstances. Children and adolescents of African descent only become “at risk” under specific historical circumstances, and as a result of specific social relationships marked by racism and oppression. However in most school-based prevention programs, the only targets of change are the individual behaviors, attitudes, and interpersonal skills of children. In their review of 177 primary prevention programs for children and adolescents, Durlak and Wells (1997) found that that 150 of these interventions (84.8%) were person-centered. This focus on change at the individual level, neglecting the sociopolitical forces that shape people’s lives, has historically been a problem in psychology, and now it seems, community psychology (Levine, 1998; Sarason, 1981). This rather superficial approach to social problems does not go undetected by participants in school-based interventions as the following example shows.

Part of my training as a first-year community psychology doctoral student involved conducting a substance abuse prevention program in a “behavior disorder” (BD) classroom in an elementary school which served people living in a Chicago public housing complex. The class consisted entirely of African American males. The intervention modules the other doctoral students and I were given by our community psychologist supervisors consisted of educational materials on the effects of drugs on the body, but mostly decision making exercises calling upon the children to “stop and think” in situations in which they were exposed to drugs (based on the work of Spivack and Shure, 1974). In the midst of one of these exercises focusing mainly on the children’s cognitive skills, one of the students in the class illuminated the discussion by saying: “We’re not the main people responsible for the drug problem. None of us and nobody we know flies any planes full of drugs into this country.” Several other students in the class echoed these concerns that our emphasis on strategies for individuals to avoid drug use fell far short of addressing a larger social problem of which individual drug use is just one part.

These students offered a cogent critique of the person-centered, individualist philosophy represented in this prevention program. Recent investigative journalism has shed more light on the arguments

these students made about other political forces contributing to the pervasiveness of illegal drugs in African American communities.² Interventions that depoliticize social problems, define them as individual problems, and prescribe only individual changes on the part of the oppressed serve to protect and maintain the status quo (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997). Such conceptualizations of social problems inhibit the flow of creative, liberating dialogue and social action.

Similarly, school-based violence prevention programs tend to focus on helping individuals manage their anger and resolve interpersonal conflict through enhanced communication and decision-making skills. Such interventions typically do not address the violence between social groups that has historically had a devastating impact on African American communities. African psychiatrist Frantz Fanon describes violence as a process through which the physical, social, or psychological integrity (or a combination of these) of another person or group is violated (Bulhan, 1985). Social oppression asserts itself through violence and is maintained over the years through violence embedded in institutional and cultural processes. This “vertical violence” for profit, securing markets, and capital accumulation began with territorial conquest and brutal exploitation of labor. Legally sanctioned violence in the name of protecting private property, and the established social order is still expressed in racial profiling, police violence (e.g. the recent case of Abner Luima in New York), police executions (e.g. the recent killings of Timothy Thomas and 14 other men of African descent in Cincinnati; Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond in New York), and racist patterns of incarceration and state executions. Fanon described how victims of vertical violence may often unleash their anger and frustration through interpersonal (“horizontal”) violence against others in their community or themselves (Bulhan, 1985). But Fanon also suggested that the development of political consciousness may reduce internecine violence among the oppressed.

Emancipatory models of education locate problems such as substance abuse and violence within the context of the larger history of abuse and violence perpetrated against people of African descent.

African-centered emancipatory models of education also recognize the economic, cultural, political, and spiritual dimensions of these problems, which are typically not addressed in decision-making models for violence and substance abuse prevention. Students deserve opportunities to discuss and reflect critically upon the multiple dimensions of these urgent problems, and on their own roles in having an impact on these problems facing their community. Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) call upon community psychology to “re-claim” a social justice agenda. Lacking such an agenda, attending only to the “risk behaviors” of the oppressed without addressing racism and oppression, community psychology is at risk of being part of what Cornell West calls a “neo-hegemonic” culture, a culture that “. . . postures as an oppositional force, but, in substance, is a manifestation of people’s allegiance and loyalty to the status quo” (West, 1982, p. 120).

AFRICAN IDENTITY, EDUCATION, AND HEALTHY OUTCOMES

One underlying assumption in advocating a critical Africanist pedagogy for children of African descent is that affirming a child’s African identity may be associated with beneficial health and sociopolitical outcomes. A growing body of research is emerging in support of the general proposition that knowledge of and respect for African culture may be positively associated with educational success and other healthy outcomes for children of African descent. For example, several studies suggest that “racial socialization” may act as a buffer against negative racial experiences and messages with which children are confronted (Stevenson, 1994, 1995). Racial socialization involves transactions with care providers through which ethnic pride and an awareness of racism in society are conveyed to the child (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Stevenson, 1994). Research by Bowman and Howard (1985) found that racial socialization was associated with greater academic achievement among African American children.

There is also evidence that positive regard toward one’s ethnic group, as measured by scales of ethnic identity, is related to educational success and other healthy outcomes. Studies by Phinney and Tarver (1988) and Phinney (1992) found higher academic performance among students with higher levels of ethnic identity. In an ecological study of ninth grade classroom environments, Sheets (1999) found that

²The San Jose Mercury ran a 3-day series written by their senior staff writer Gary Webb from Sunday, August 18, 1996, through Tuesday, August 20, that details the ways in which the CIA, FBI, and drug enforcement agencies introduced and fueled the spread of cocaine in African American communities.

programs using cultural knowledge and promoting ethnic identity had higher levels of academic success. A study by Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, and Seay (1999) using structural equation modeling found that ethnic identity and self-esteem contribute to children's perceptions of their ability to achieve academically and other prosocial attitudes. Belgrave, Van Oss Marin, and Chambers (2000) found higher ethnic identity to be associated with less risky sexual attitudes among female African American adolescents. Similar research describes positive relationships between racial identity and educational success among children of African descent (e.g. Ford, 1997), racial identity and drug attitudes among African American children (e.g. Townsend & Belgrave, 2000), and racial identity and other competencies among African American adolescents (e.g. Arroyo & Zigler, 1995).

Having preceded these empirical findings on relationships between measures of African identity, educational success and other healthy outcomes, African-centered emancipatory education proceeds from the awareness that education is itself a process of cultural socialization and identity construction. Education is a vehicle through which cultural values, ideals, and historical knowledge are transmitted to new generations. According to Akbar (1998), "The first function of education is to provide identity" (p. 2). Education assists the student in locating herself or himself historically, and may accomplish that task optimally when culturally syntonic and affirming of African identity. Beyond strengthening identity and academic achievement, a critical Africanist pedagogy involves a critique of racist institutions and calls upon the student to continue a historical legacy. These features of African-centered emancipatory education set it apart from multicultural education programs. Many multicultural education programs are based upon a "tolerance paradigm" (Derman-Sparks, 1998; Nieto, 1998), in which information on selected people of African descent may be added to texts and new celebrations added to the school calendar. "The most common understanding of multicultural education is that it consists largely of additive content rather than of structural changes in content and processes" (Nieto, 1998, p. 7). The aim of African-centered emancipatory education is not just to expand the student's store of knowledge on that which is African and enhance racial/ethnic identity, but to inspire the student to participate in a community of great achievers. One of the most significant healthy outcomes of African-centered emancipatory education may be the student as social change agent. Within this pedagogical

framework, "Students do not learn to read and write; they read and write in order to learn. Liberatory education provides them with the heuristic tools and skills to critique ideas. . . . Liberatory education expands one's horizons and challenges the cultural hegemony of the traditional canons. . . ." (Gordon, 1995, p. 65)

STUDENTS AS SOCIAL CHANGE AGENTS

School-based prevention programs are often forms of action research in which community psychologists, mental health professionals, or graduate student research assistants assume the roles of change agents or social actors who seek to prevent certain (unhealthy or risky) actions of the students participating in the action research program. Participants in many of these studies are taught "school adjustment" strategies and skills for adapting to anger-evoking situations, drug-infested environments, and unjust social circumstances without responding aggressively and without using drugs. These programs may be consistent with what Ellul (1964) describes as mainstream education's socializing function: "Education makes us happy in a milieu which normally would have made us unhappy, if we had not been worked on, molded, and formed for just that milieu."

Students in African-centered emancipatory education take on the roles of social actors, continuing a tradition of social action by people of African descent. An underlying assumption in this approach to education is that children of African descent should not be required to adjust to an education that is maladjusted for them and their community, acquiesce to living in a community infested with drugs, or repress their indignation at structures of oppression. Before the publication in English of the works of Paulo Freire, African American emancipatory educators Carter G. Woodson and Benjamin E. Mays defined education as a healing and empowering resource preparing the student for social action against injustice. Benjamin E. Mays, the mentor and teacher of Martin Luther King Jr., saw education as being much more than just acquiring skills or information. "Mays defined education in terms of social responsibility and the educated person as an instrument to bring about a positive change in society . . . to do something in the world around them to correct some of the problems, and to make it a better place in which to live" (Matthews, 1998, p. 281). Education (as opposed to "schooling") speaks directly to the urgent issues in the student's

daily life, preparing the student to act upon these issues. *Praxis* is a central concept in emancipatory education. *Praxis* means not just practice based on theory, but learning that is deepened by engagement in work for social change, linking students' critical reflections upon theories with social action (Murrell, 1997).

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES FOR HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION

As expressed in the writings of Carter G. Woodson and Benjamin E. Mays and reflected in the creation of independent Black schools, education has been highly valued in African American history and culture. The history and culture of African people provide more than ancillary resources for school-based interventions. They offer substantially more than an alternative format or "flavor" in which to envelop and disseminate ideas that emanate from North American clinical psychology. In his remarks given upon being awarded the Seymour B. Sarason Award from APA Division 27, Levine (1998) says that to be effective, preventive interventions must impact and be grounded in norms, "common culture," and structures that support the behavior prescribed by the intervention. "Techniques for coping and for giving and receiving social support may operate more effectively among members of a group who share a common culture including an articulated ideology, and who have a sense of community" (p. 194).

Like psychology generally, school-based prevention programs reflect certain underlying values and ontological notions about the nature of problems people face, and beliefs about appropriate methods for addressing these problems. Cognitive-behavioral and psychoeducational interventions reflect a prioritizing of individual behaviors and decision-making skills. These approaches are most amenable to a more positivistic study of social phenomena, allowing the researcher to observe individual participants' acquisition of skills taught and measure the quantity of new information learned. Levine (1998) raises a caution about this type of approach: "Meeting the assumptions of the statistical model may result in a dilution, if not a destruction of the synergistic effects that may emerge precisely because each observation (i.e., each trained individual) is not and should not be independent. Taking the concept of an-other-than individual psychology seriously thus may have important implications for basic methodology" (p. 193).

Within African-centered emancipatory models of education, problems in the community are not

exclusively attributed to risk behaviors or skill deficits of individual community members. African-centered emancipatory education looks at social problems within the context of the historical processes and social forces that have transformed communities of people of African descent. Major contributors to these problems are identified as resource asymmetries, structures of domination, and the forced rupture with African cultural traditions and healing resources. This multifaceted system of domination is described by African educators and psychologists as the *maafa* (Ani, 1994), a Kiswahili word which means "disaster." A central feature of African-centered models of education is countering the *maafa* through reconnecting students with African and African American history, traditions, values, and principles. Several sets of African-based principles are incorporated in African-centered pedagogy, including the *nguzo saba*, *ntu* principles, 42 *maat* principles, and seven *maat* virtues (Foster, Phillips, Belgrave, Randolph, & Braithwaite, 1993; Hilliard, 1998).

African history and wisdom teachings provide more than just additional content for primary prevention programs. The Akan symbol *sankofa* represents the African teaching that reclaiming and understanding history are essential for understanding present circumstances and moving forward into the future. For children of African descent, understanding both the African cultural legacy of intellectual achievement and the contemporary structures of domination are essential in preparing them to confront conditions that are destroying their communities. "Reclaiming historical memory" is an essential component of liberatory education and liberatory psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994). Providing children with the tools for deconstructing miseducation and misrepresentations of the African experience, reconstructing knowledge of African history and philosophies, and constructing a better life for the community are what Akbar (1998) and Banks (1982) identify as three critical methods for Black psychology and education. African historical memory includes but precedes by centuries the experiences of racism and colonial oppression. African history and wisdom teachings are deep wells of spiritually revitalizing resources for young people to tap. "African indigenous pedagogy is the vision of the teacher as a selfless healer intent on inspiring, transforming, and propelling students to a higher spiritual level" (Hilliard, 1998, p. 78). Reclaiming historical memory means reading about and emulating ancestral figures who taught about spiritual growth, developed sciences and mathematics, and

who engineered movements for transforming oppressive societies. Historical memory can cultivate a sense of agency and inspire students' own participation in social action. This has been the case in the Benjamin E. Mays Institute.

THE BENJAMIN E. MAYS INSTITUTE

The Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI), a cluster of 100 male students of African descent within a Hartford public middle school, incorporates principles from African-centered emancipatory education in its programs for students, parents, and the surrounding community. BEMI is located on Hartford's North End, a community in which two thirds of the male students of African descent entering high school fail to reach the 12th grade. Major components of BEMI are its rites of passage program (directed by a community elder with over 30 years of experience in rites of passage programs in Africa and the United States), parent organization, mentorship program, community workshops and conferences, African-centered curriculum, off-campus studies (visits this academic year to Yale University, Harvard University, Holy Cross College, and Trinity College), and forums involving students and community leaders addressing major issues in the community.

The students' sense of ownership, critical agency, and immersion in African principles are expressed in the newspaper that they edit and publish. An article in the second issue of their newspaper identifies some of the principles the students find particularly relevant—*sankofa*, *kujicahgulia* (Kiswahili for self-determination), *sba* (Kemetic term meaning teaching, learning, wisdom, and study), and *maat* (Kemetic term representing the integration of truth, justice, righteousness, balance, reciprocity, and harmony). Addressing this article to members of the community, the author explains, "Some of the ways your sons prosper is that we not only practice African terms, we study them, memorize them, and believe in them. This is part of the way the boys do so well not only in school but also out of school" (Morgan, 2000, p. 2).

A major concern for the students in BEMI has been the problem of violence, especially police violence against young men of African descent. Around the same time of the fatal police shootings of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond in New York, Malik Jones in New Haven, and Franklyn Reid in New Milford, an unarmed 14-year-old, Aquan Salmon was shot to death on Hartford's North End by a white police officer. BEMI organized a community forum on

this problem that was held in the school auditorium. A panel of community leaders, including students from BEMI, addressed the forum and shared ideas on what must be done to stop police violence and racial profiling. Students from BEMI engaged community leaders in discussions on this problem and suggested possible solutions. Articles have been written by BEMI students in their newspaper analyzing not only police violence but gang violence and other urgent issues impacting the community. Reading, writing, and engagement in other school activities are connected with confronting structures of domination. Students not only read about African history and principles but are challenged to participate in that history and live these principles.

In the 5-year history of BEMI, its students have consistently outscored all other students in the middle school on the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT), and more BEMI students make the honor role than those in any other school cluster. Data from the Hartford Public Schools on the 1999 CMT results (see Table I) show that the percentage of students in BEMI meeting or surpassing the state performance goal in mathematics exceeded that of all other Hartford public middle schools, and was more than twice that of the public school in which BEMI is located (Connecticut Policy and Economic Council, 2000). This year as in years past, students have entered BEMI with "special education" labels, but have gone on to pass the CMT for their grade level and make the honor roll. In a study comparing cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) of BEMI students with other students in the same middle school, Gordon (2000) found significantly higher GPAs for BEMI students. In addition to outperforming other students on indicators of success such as the CMT and GPAs, BEMI students have been stronger on measures of African identity. Using the Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Helms & Parham, 1985, cited in Gordon, 2000) and the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992, cited

Table I. 1999 Connecticut Mastery Test Results: Percentage of Students at or Above State Goal for Middle Schools

Subject	Hartford (overall)	Fox middle school	Benjamin E. Mays
Math	27	20	47 ^a
Writing	32	38	60
Reading	36	35	30 ^b

Source: Our Children, Our Schools: 2000–2001 Guide to Hartford's Public Schools and Parent Resources. Connecticut Policy and Economic Council.

^aIn 2000, this increased to 60.

^bIn 2000, this increased to 50.

in Gordon, 2000), Gordon (2000) found higher scores in racial and ethnic identity among BEMI students than among other students in the same middle school.

The teachers, parents, and other community members involved with BEMI are presently exploring the possibility of opening BEMI as a state charter school. As a charter school BEMI would have greater control over curriculum and school programs, and greater autonomy in maintaining an African-centered emancipatory school culture. This strategy subverts the original agenda of proponents of charter schools by creating an African-centered school in the public domain and expanding the educational alternatives for children of African descent (Murrell, 1999). This strategy will also mean expanding BEMI to serve more students.

“NGUZU SABA. IS THAT SOME KIND OF RELIGION YOU ARE TEACHING THE CHILDREN?”

This question was presented to BEMI directors by a state education official during one of the many meetings involved in the application process for a state charter school. Upon learning that a goal in this African-centered school is students' spiritual development, the concern often arises that a religion is being taught in violation of the statutory separation between church and state. Another concern is that an Africanist pedagogy within a relatively autonomous, autochthonous institution may mean the propagation of an anti-White ideology and the uncritical glorification of everything African. Although exploring the underlying dynamics of more general fears of Africanist institutions is beyond the scope of this paper, clarification of what is meant by spirituality will be provided, as will a discussion of some criticisms and caveats associated with opening BEMI as a charter school.

Apprehension about promoting students' spiritual growth is often based on confusion about the difference between spirituality and religion. Spirituality refers to the awareness of a causal force or higher power that operates in all aspects of existence, and to the personal experience of that sacred presence (Mbiti, 1989; Potts, 1998). Religion may provide a specific framework for the expression of spirituality, but differs in that it is an established system of beliefs, symbols, and liturgy shared by a community of faith. Accessing the spiritual dimension of life has been considered a source of strength, hope, healing, harmony, and greater understanding of one's purpose in

life. In BEMI there is no teaching or guided practice of any specific religion. Spirituality is honored as a core feature of African cultures throughout the diaspora (Jones, 1991; Nobles, 1991). Spirituality and faith (“Imani”) are acknowledged as having sustained people of African descent through the centuries of social oppression, providing hope through seemingly hopeless circumstances.

One general criticism of African-centered education from the ideological right has already been answered in the preceding discussion on BEMI student academic performance. That criticism is that African-centered pedagogy focuses on the African past at the expense of teaching mathematics, science, and other basic skills needed for success in modern society. A more specific criticism leveled against the opening of BEMI as a charter school is that doing so weakens the public school system by extracting from it a program that has been successful in the many ways described earlier. From the ideological left, the argument could be made that a more genuinely liberatory agenda would be the transformation of the public school system as a whole.

Opening an African-centered, public charter school need not be in opposition to a larger agenda of transforming public education. Alongside of its mission to provide education for the students in the Institute, bringing change to public education has also been a focus of BEMI. For example, each year BEMI invites public school teachers, administrators, parents, students, university faculty, and community activists to share ideas at a conference on education. Participants have come from around the country, and workshops have provided settings for discussion on such topics as critical African-centered pedagogy, the role of parents in educational excellence, and the relationships between education and other social justice issues. System level change is a protracted process that is typically initiated by smaller first steps. The new structure for BEMI will allow more students to attend and enjoy the benefits that it can provide, while BEMI continues to function as a rallying point for change in public education. BEMI will become one of over 400 African-centered schools in the United States (Murrell, 1999).

TOWARD AN EMANCIPATORY MODEL OF SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION?

In closing let us consider how school-based prevention programs may be developed that are

compatible with African-centered emancipatory education. This is an important consideration given the large number of such prevention programs located in communities of people of African descent. As an example, how might a school-based violence prevention program more closely fit within the framework of African-centered emancipatory education? Such a program would need to address the problem of violence in historical context; illuminate the problem with African wisdom teachings; examine the interpersonal, sociopolitical, and spiritual dimensions of the problem; and incorporate the voice of the students in speaking to the problem's culturally specific manifestations and solutions.

Written African wisdom teachings on the problem of violence have been in existence for over 4,000 years, long before colonialism and institutions of racist oppression. The wisdom teachings of the Egyptian sage Ptahhotep, who lived circa 2350 B.C., address the problem of violence specifically. In *The Teachings of Ptahhotep* (Hilliard, Williams, & Damali, 1987), the oldest surviving complete text in the world, there are 14 teachings on preventing interpersonal violence as well as violence in society as a whole. Ptahhotep taught that those in positions of power can create conditions that provoke violence, and that greed sets violence in motion at both the individual and social levels. The wisdom of Ptahhotep addresses the structural or institutional dimensions of violence as well as interpersonal expressions of violence.

Presenting the teachings of Ptahhotep (re)connects students with ancestral figures from their cultural legacy while providing them with valuable insights on the nature of violence. Ptahhotep's more contextual analysis of violence, like Fanon's analysis of violence discussed earlier, is one in which the student is not singled out and castigated as the primary source of violence, yet is challenged to not contribute to a process that continues to harm the community. These informative discussions of the problem of violence from Ptahhotep illustrate how African historical figures often speak directly to issues impacting the students and their communities today.

Proceeding from foundational discussions on the history and social context of violence, violence prevention programs could go on to focus on some of the specific practices among children in the community that may escalate into interpersonal violence. For example, a "stop the ranking" program at BEMI in-

cluded students' critical examination of the social influences and values expressed in verbal dueling practices that sometimes escalate into personal insult and conflict. Students in this program are called upon to use the same skills in verbal repartee, critical thinking, and creativity in the service of conflict resolution and strengthening unity and mutual respect. Similarly, based upon the author's years of experience in program development for African-centered schools in Chicago, *Signifying as a Scaffold for Literary Interpretation: The Pedagogical Implications of an African American Discourse Genre* (Lee, 1993) describes how specific verbal practices of African American children can serve as a vital resource for enhancing literacy development and academic achievement. Using "signifying as a scaffolding" and interventions to "stop the ranking" mobilize culturally specific practices in the service of successful education and social development.

A program on violence prevention could also acknowledge spiritual and religious traditions of people of African descent, traditions that affirm the sacredness of human life and contain teachings against violence. Members of the community who have been able to turn away from violence through spiritual transformation may be called upon to share their experiences. This type of personal narrative from a community member was helpful for students in BEMI, and is described in an article in the students' newspaper (Collins, 2000).

Interventions grounded in African history, cultural practices, and spirituality, which take the perspective of the oppressed on the sociopolitical dimensions of violence, may not be the kind of intervention with which many community psychologists feel comfortable. Such an approach may seem outside of one's range of expertise, professional interests, values, or epistemology. In school-based prevention programs of this type, community psychologists may need to negotiate new roles and relationships, new identities in the community. The new relationships would require a willingness to participate in "horizontal" collaborations as opposed to "vertical" collaborations (Sinha, 1984), or serve as "resource" collaborators as opposed to "experts" (Tyler et al. cited in Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). Participating in an emancipatory approach to school-based prevention in communities of people of African descent may require commitment to a liberation psychology. Martín-Baró (1994) suggests that participation in a liberation psychology requires a new perspective and new alignment

for community psychologists—the perspective of and alignment with the dominated and the oppressed.

And even as community psychologists we often come into the community mounted on the carriage of our plans and projects, bringing our own know-how and money. It is not easy to figure out how to place ourselves within the process alongside the dominated rather than alongside the dominator. It is not even easy to leave our role of technocratic or professional superiority and to work hand in hand with community groups. But if we do not embark upon this new type of praxis that transforms ourselves as well as transforming reality, it will be hard indeed to develop a Latin American psychology that will contribute to the liberation of our peoples. (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 29)

This new type of praxis will also be needed for a community psychology that will contribute to the liberation of people of African descent.

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