Cultural Themes in Rites of Passage: Voices of Young African American Males

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, our society has begun to take a closer look at the plight of urban adolescent African American males. This population has come under close scrutiny because of the seemingly pervasive negativity they face on a daily basis. Hill (1992) candidly punctuated the negative forces that are taking their toll on young African American males in cities across the country. Black males, particularly adolescents in urban areas, have been a vulnerable group in relation to such destructive activities as substance abuse and gang involvement (Wright & Anderson, 1998; Hill, 1992). Families in crisis add more gloom to this picture as many of these adolescent males are in various out-of-home placements. Frustration and confusion abound for these youth as they grapple with low self-esteem and a bruised sense of ethnic identity.

The increase in substance abuse and violent behavior among today’s adolescents could be linked to society’s underutilization of Rites of Passage (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993; Campbell & Moyers 1988). Informal indicators of adulthood such as drinking, promiscuous sexual behavior, and gang involvement serve as socially proscribed transitional markers (Quinn, Newfield, & Protinsky, 1985; Hill, 1992). Contemporary Rites of Passage (RITES) that are culturally specific in design denounce such self-defeating behaviors and promote pro-social and pro-familial lifestyles. Such programming

Qualitative inquiry was used in this study to examine an Africentric Rites of Passage Program (AA-RITES) and assess the benefits of this program vis-à-vis self-esteem and ethnic identity enhancement for adolescent African American males in out-of-home care. Twenty-nine AA-RITES participants were interviewed and observed. Content analysis was employed in the form of data reduction, data displays, and conclusion drawing and verification to code the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Through an inductive process, grounded theory, triangulated with the Africentric Perspective and Existential Philosophy, accentuated the following themes: (1) Importance of Learning and Giving Back What You Have Learned and the Will to Strive for Your Best; (2) Family Solidarity and Cultural Interconnectedness; (3) Condemnation of Violence and Unproductive Behavior; and (4) Reverence for the Creator.

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could be effective for young African American males in out-of-home care who would benefit from cultural enrichment (Gavazzi, Alford, & McKenry, 1996).

Some researchers argue that programs have been in place through the years that emphasize self-esteem through self-sufficiency and survival tactics in relation to life skills development (Griffin, 1992; Goldstein, Sprafkin, Gershaw, & Klein, 1980; Dangerfield & Shaffer, 1978). The lack of focus on cultural issues may be a key reason why some of these programs have not had great success (Gavazzi et al., 1996; Mullender & Miller, 1985; Gill & Jackson, 1983). A critical notion to consider when surveying this problem is that when youth are taken from their families of origin and placed in out-of-home care, they are often removed from their immediate social and/or cultural community as well (Gavazzi et al., 1996). This transition is difficult and often not welcomed, and youth are left with feelings of loss and confusion. The establishment of a sense of ethnic identity is a decisive factor in the adolescent’s ability to develop other forms of identity related to occupation, ideology, and interpersonal relationships (Steinberg, 1993; McKenry, Everett, Ramseur, & Carter, 1989). This article addresses this issue through an exploration of one program’s attempt to improve the cultural climate and forecast for its male participants.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The statistics are staggering for African American children in out-of-home care. Overall, there are approximately 588,000 children in the United States foster care system. In the year 2000, 66% of those children were children of color; Black, non-Hispanic children made up 39% of the foster care rolls (Child Welfare League of America, 2002). These high numbers alone speak to the need for cultural specificity in human service programming and service delivery.

Akbar (1991) coined the term “democratic sanity” to refer to the application of normative mental health diagnoses, treatment procedures, and standards to all cultures. Democratic sanity explains in part why the African American community has been resistant to traditional quantitative studies that do not explicate indigenous strengths of the culture (p. 339). Often these approaches or studies, such as the work of Murray (1994) and Moynihan (1965), have been used against this group. This qualitative study of the Ohio Rites of Passage Program, sponsored through the Office of Child Care and Family Services, Ohio Department of Human Services, is sig-