

Identity and African American Youth

Addressing Critical Issues

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Identity and African American Youth

From the standpoint of child development, adolescence is a time when children begin to discover and define themselves. Expectations based on “mainstream norms” can have a dichotomous impact on this stage of self-development in African American children and youth (Gullan et al, 2011).

Influences on identity development in African American children can be positively mediated through a strong family foundation and community ties. African American parents and extended family members are instrumental in helping children to develop a positive self-concept and racial identity through racial socialization, and preparation of children to grow into adult roles and responsibilities (Gullan et al, 2011; Hill & Chao, 2009; Hughes et al., 2006). However, as children become adolescents, they inevitably spend more hours of the day and week in a variety of environments away from such positive influences (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). This can affect the degree to which such positive influences are internalized and sustained.

As girls and boys transition to and from their home and community environments, they are exposed to a variety of factors that impact their identity development. Such factors include: (1) interactions with female and male peers (Tatum, 1997); (2) the ways in which they relate to their parents and family members as they grapple with simultaneous needs for independence and dependence; (3) exposure to

the plethora of African American male and female images portrayed in print material and the media (Gooding, 2010); and (4) the underlying context of race relations based on the history of racial groups in this country (Bonner, et al, 2009 Thomas, Hoxha, & Hacker, 2012). The intersection of these factors can have a profound effect on how children and youth see themselves or experience their sense of self.

Boys and girls growing up African American in 21st century society face the covert reality that they live in a nation entrenched in a long history that has marginalized the race into which they were born (Singleton, 2006, Tatum, 1997). Integration of a positive adult identity can be a unique challenge for African American teenagers because they learn from a young age, that at different times in American history, their race has carried a negative social stigma based on the color of their skin (Takaki, 1989; Tatum, 1997). Racism remains a powerful presence in American society. Although overt acts of racism have shifted since the early decades of this country’s history, the impact of privilege based on one’s race persists as a prevailing construct in American society (Helms, 1990; Lindsey, Martinez, & Lindsey 2009; Singleton, 2006; Takaki, 1989). The residue from this socio-political reality can impede African American youth from experiencing identity development free of misconceived self-perceptions (Irving & Hudley 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2011; Singleton et.al. 2007).

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The pressure of challenging the predominant societal myth of being an African American male or female can result in a range of paths to identity development. African American adolescents may opt to choose a 'race less' identity (Harris & Marsh, 2010), suppress the desire to achieve because being smart is associated with 'being white' (Toldson & Owens, 2010), exhibit oppositional behavior (Ogbu, 2003), isolate themselves socially and/or find it hard to focus on achieving in school (Bonner, 2009; Coakley, et al., 2011).

These counterproductive indicators should not be ignored, but rather recognized, understood and balanced with alternative outlooks and role models whose experience and background they can relate to (Derek et al, 2009). African American youth who have a more balanced sense of self are more likely to stay grounded, confident and resilient.

It is essential for educators and parents to become authentically attuned to this generation's experience of what it is like to 'come into being' as an African American male or female adolescent. This calls for adult awareness of and sensibility to the scope and significance that identity development holds for 21st century African American youth (Cooper, 2002; Steen, 2009.) All children have a right to come into their own surrounded, in each of their environments, by adults who acknowledge, affirm and encourage identity development that is positive, balanced and healthy. (Boykin, Noguera, 2011; Gullan et al, 2011). Such capacity positions adults to evolve as reliable advocates in the lives of African American youth. As a result, their process of identity development will enable them to take advantage of opportunities for productive growth and lead them to high quality life choices.

PROMISING PRACTICES

- Boiana, J.; Munwah, L.(2009). **If These Halls Could Talk- Workshop Series** www.diversityconversations.com; www.stirfryseminars.com
If These Halls Could Talk is a groundbreaking program developed by John Boiano and Lee Mun Wah, where students gather in small groups to discuss their personal concerns about their identity development, emotional outlook and physical safety as they deal with bullying as it relates to classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism and violence in school. The workshops focus on positive social skills and role modeling, personal accountability, and the exploration of how our biases, and stereotypes affect our perceptions and relationships with each other.
- Gooding, F., (2011). **You Mean There's Race in My Movie? The Complete Instructor's Guide for Understanding Race in Hollywood.** www.minorityreporter.com
Fredrick Gooding Jr., founder of The Minority Reporter website, asserts that mainstream movies can have a strong cultural impact, particularly regarding the perpetuation of racial imagery and how Americans relate around notions of race. This interactive multi-media discussion goes "behind the scenes" to explore the ways in which minority images are consciously created, manipulated, and distributed to audiences around the globe.
- Munwah, L.(2009). **If These Halls Could Talk: Part One and Part Two – The Educational Film Series** www.diversityconversations.com; www.stirfryseminars.com
In the summers of 2010 and 2011, Director, Lee Mun Wah brought together eleven racially diverse

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college students from around the country to answer questions about their identity development and the challenges of coping with racism on a college campus. In the process of sharing their stories and different life experiences with each other, they discover and expose the complexity and anguish that accompany those experiences, while trying to be understood and validated in a predominantly white environment.

- Gullan, R.L., College, G.M., Hoffman, B.N. et al. (2011). **I Do, But I Don't: The Search for Identity in Urban African Americans.** *Perspectives on Urban Education, Spring 2011.*
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- Steen, S. (2009) **Group Counseling for African American Elementary Students: An Exploratory Study.** *The Journal of Specialists for Group Work 34(2) 101–117.*

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