

# Motivational Counseling: A Black Educational Imperative

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**T**HE beginning of the past decade marked a renewed emphasis on the criticality of the educational institution and its inseparable relationship to the struggle for liberation and self-determination of black people in America. So many administrators, teachers, and counselors believe that black parents are not concerned about education. They could not be further from the truth.

Education through the years has represented the most certain survival route for black people. The community has been acutely aware for some time that the most dependable avenue for young blacks to travel, in order to potentially escape the social, economic, and political oppression of black communities across this nation, was and *remains* the avenue that leads to educational success. As the old "folks" used to say, "education was something no one could take away from you." However, the community was not aware of the price that one had to pay for educational success. The analogy used by Grier and Cobbs in *Black Rage* to substantiate the point just made is as follows:

For him the long process of education is something akin to the trial of a long distance runner who is occasionally peppered with buckshot; he may complete the race but it will take something out of him.<sup>1</sup>

Residential segregation as a working

<sup>1</sup> William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs. *Black Rage*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1968. p. 132.

reality and the black communities that result from the practice represent a direct and accurate reflection of the discrimination and injustice of this society toward black people. The concept of "life chances," as developed by Max Weber and defined as the extent to which people have access to economic and political power,<sup>2</sup> is seriously hampered by residential segregation. Individual and group powerlessness, frustration, and an acute identity crisis depict the residue from such an institutionalized practice. Mr. Weber also compared individuals and groups in terms of differences in "life styles." The "life styles" illustrate the various ways of behaving which in turn will determine the amount of esteem, honor, and prestige attached to them.<sup>3</sup> Varying "life styles" are so directly contributed to by residential segregation. Children at a very early age are extremely aware of these differences in the "life chances" and "life styles."

## Societal Reflection

Education, as an institution, was developed in consonance with the expressed needs of the majority group (which is white) of the

<sup>2</sup> See: Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, editors. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Magnolia, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, Publisher, Inc., 1946. Chapter on "Caste, Class, and Party."

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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American society without regard to the needs or even the existence of black and native-American citizens. If the above has some validity, then it would lead one to question the legitimacy and the viability of such an institution to meet the needs of black people specifically or those of people of color generally. Therefore, we can conclude that the American educational system is designed to perpetuate the social order as it is presently constituted, and not to produce scores of human beings who would feel obligated to question the fundamental assumptions upon which the society is based.

Volumes of easily accessible research would lead us to conclude that the American educational system has not responded to the group or individual needs of the black community. The following basic assumptions relative to our educational system are submitted for close scrutiny based on the previously mentioned research:

1. Given the nature of the American society and its tradition, one must believe that the educational system is not equipped to educate black people.
2. The educational system is designed to perpetuate the existing structures and is not willing to pursue its goal of "a search for truth."
3. The system fails to teach children how to gain and maintain a positive identity through self-worth and social responsibility.
4. The school fails to assume the role of family surrogate.

### **Black Student Profile**

The literature clearly substantiates the high incidence of low self-esteem, lack of motivation, poor performance, and low achievement levels among black children in the public schools. For at least 25 years or more, the "learned" school of thought pertaining to the relationship of the educational system to black children and the reasons for the massive failure of our children was supported by the following:

1. A subtle (oftentimes blatant) consensus on the innate inferiority of black children

2. Low educational level of black parents
3. Unbearable conditions of the black home environment
4. Lack of positive values within the home and the community
5. Poverty conditions that exist in the black community.

I hold that black children (as a group) do not arrive on the educational scene with irreparable self-images and branded as failures by their home and neighborhood environments. It is generally found—as in Deutsch's work at the Institute for Developmental Studies<sup>4</sup>—that the achievement differences between lower class (represents better than 50 percent of the total) blacks and middle class whites are minimal at grade one, but they increase progressively as children move through the grades. Scholarly opinion now substantiates that our children are lost to education somewhere between kindergarten and the third grade. The educational experience is the one that brands children with the indelible tag of failure. And subsequently it seems that black children get a disproportionate share of the failure tags.

Recent psychological research on the mental health of children in New York City produced some rather provocative results. The study was conducted by a team of six black psychologists and psychiatrists on a control group of 2,000 children, which included blacks, whites, and Puerto Ricans. The control group crossed socioeconomic lines as well as ethnic delineations (that is, middle class, poor, welfare recipients, and others). In all their findings there was only one area that was considered a plus for black children—at age six they were more mentally healthy than all others tested.

The conclusion expressed by Thomas S. Langner, chief investigator for the team, was that the stress of being black in American society is the primary cause of a significant increase of mental illness in black teen-agers. He added, "This extreme stress is probably present regardless of black wealth, education,

<sup>4</sup> Martin Deutsch, *The Disadvantaged Child*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1967. p. 400.

or skills.<sup>5</sup> The team further suggests that one out of every four black teen-agers suffers serious mental impairment and is in need of care!

When discussing the black student profile, we must take into account how important the societal reflection is on the development of a healthy self-image. In relationship to this reflection, Alvin Poussaint suggests that:

For the Black youth in white American society, the generalized other whose attitude he assumes and the looking glass into which he gazes both reflect the same judgment: he is inferior because he is Black. His self-image developed in the lowest stratum of a color caste system, is shaped, defined, and evaluated by a generalized other which is racist or warped by racists. His self-concept naturally becomes a negatively esteemed one, nurtured through contact with such institutionalized symbols of caste inferiority as segregated schools, neighborhoods, and jobs and more indirect negative indicators such as the reactions of his own family who have been socialized to believe that they are sub-standard human beings.<sup>6</sup>

The looking glass effect that the society has on black children is all-encompassing and I would suggest that all black people bear scars from its ravaging presence.

With all this working against black youths, it makes one wonder why so many of them even bother with a system that demonstrates, almost on an hourly basis, that they are less valued in the society of their birth than are other citizens and that the determination is made on the basis of skin color. Dr. Poussaint answers this question in the following manner:

In the course of the socialization process, the individual acquires needs which motivate behavior and generate emotion. Three such needs concern us here: the need for achievement, the need for self-assertion or aggression, and the need for approval.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "A Starting Point Defined." *Ebony Magazine* 25 (1): 136-37; November 1969.

<sup>6</sup> Alvin Poussaint and Carolyn Atkinson. "Black Youth and Motivation." *The Black Scholar*, March 1970, p. 46. Published by the Black World Foundation, San Francisco, California.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

The existence of these needs should not be considered revealing; however, the way these needs are met is what must be examined. The life style of the black community is a cybernetic reaction to a racist society. This means simply that for every action there is a reaction. Protective mechanisms are built into the life style that aid the individual in warding off as much pain as possible. These mechanisms manifest themselves in many different ways, such as dress, music, dance, style, attitudes, and values.

These basic and human needs of black youth are fulfilled through an adaptation process which filters white values/goals through a black life style. The end result is that black youths via the life style have very high aspirational levels, but the behavior patterns developed are not consistent with the internalized white values and goals and, therefore, the direction toward the successful realization of their goals is oftentimes unrealistic or non-existent. A significant shortcoming of the black life style is that it fails to provide our children with a strong sense of discipline and its importance.

### Some Things To Know

Effective counseling must be prefaced by the establishment of a sincere, trust relationship between the counselor and the counselee. In the course of trying to operationalize the trust relationship, the counselor should seek always to be fair, consistent, and well disciplined. Here it is necessary to emphasize discipline, because my experience tells me that this is the ingredient that more often than not prevents black students and their counselors from establishing sound working relationships.

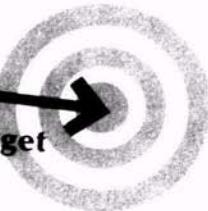
To further enhance the effectiveness of the counselor, his familiarity with the following cultural syndromes is essential: the reality of "gaming," the concepts of "brinkmanship" and "show me."

"Gaming" is a defense mechanism used within the black life style which offers the user alternatives to pain and a false sense of security from the unknown. Black people



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have a cultural history of running games on the oppressor. From the plantation days down to the present, as survival mechanisms, we have developed distinct patterns of behavior and language usage. I would assert that "gaming" has been going on for so many generations that black youths are now having extreme difficulty distinguishing between the games and reality. It has become such an integral part of so many young black personalities that often they find themselves "gaming" on people who are committed to aiding them in realizing their innermost goals or in situations that are relatively safe. Peer group pressure often forces black youth to adhere more closely to the gaming syndrome even when clear distinction can be articulated. This is not to be underestimated!

"Brinkmanship" is a frequently used testing method by black youths to find out just how far they can push an authority figure before he or she will react in a manner which will predict a behavior pattern that can be gamed upon. This method is used with

sophistication by both males and females; however, it represents the end of the line for most females. Females are not usually predisposed to physical confrontation with authority figures. Their most vicious and persistent assaults are usually verbal ones. Peer acceptance can oftentimes be the chief motivational factor behind the constant use of this testing method. It is my experience that black youths who resort to this method consistently are, in a perverted sense, asking for attention, discipline, and consistency from those representatives of the institution or the larger society.

"Show Me" is a more easily identifiable testing method because it has very obvious physical and masculine overtones. This method could be compared to "walking the burning sands." Before black youths will accept your presence, you have to prove yourself by some overt display of accomplishment. The reality of the street, and the cultural paranoia that ensues, literally requires black youths to be very distrustful of people regardless of

color. The standards and tools used for evaluation of the authority (counselor) figure are again shaped by those obvious oppressive forces we identified earlier. If one understands the life style, then he must decide how he can best go about gaining acceptance from the youth. With young black males, it many times takes physical confrontation. Male authority figures have an advantage over females in the same position. If the male figure knows how to box, wrestle, play the contact sports, shoot pool, etc., he can oftentimes avoid the outright confrontation by showing his ability to overcome his challengers and meet their need to be shown.

The interplay between the sexes is very important here. Girls will go all out against male authority figures because they realize that the socialization process says that boys are not supposed to hit girls and they expect that unequivocally from male adults, young and old. On the other hand, boys will go much further with a female figure, as a rule, because the same socialization process spells out that males clearly have a physical advantage over females. Thus, the only behavioral responses that they can predict from a female figure is tears, tongue lashing, or throwing them out of class or school. Because of the seriousness of male emasculation at an early age in the black community, this concept of "show me" will have to be dealt with for some time.

I am not suggesting that "the answers" or some magic solutions to the difficulties surrounding motivational counseling are contained within this paper. I do feel that, by establishing a meaningful trust relationship and by understanding the concepts of gam-ing, brinkmanship, and show me, one has a better chance of reaching the desired objective, which I hope is to save black children from destruction.

In conclusion, may I reemphasize the fact that we are talking about the survival of a people. The Kerner Report indicated that, at the end of grade six, black youths were finding themselves 1.6 grades behind their white counterpart. At the end of grade twelve, they were 3.3 grades behind their white counterpart. We cannot continue to allow this wanton destruction of young black minds without selecting new educational imperatives and alternatives.

We must begin to redefine specific role definitions that pertain to the present educational framework. School teacher, counselor, administrator, and community must all be redefined within a humanistic framework that will, by definition, force a radical change in the operation and responsibility of the institution whose primary objective is to serve *all* the people.

After the definitions are articulated, then we must begin to deal with teacher, pupil, and parental expectations of black children. If the teacher believes consciously or subconsciously that the student cannot learn, in most cases the student will not learn. If the student and the teacher are convinced that he (the student) cannot learn, failure is almost guaranteed. If the teacher, student, and the parent are convinced that the student cannot learn, in most cases the student will not learn. The latter is prevalent in so many cases of young boys and girls and their parents who do not realize that they too exhibit doubt in the ability of their children to learn.

For a people who have struggled to survive kidnappings in the motherland (Africa), the "middle passage," the "peculiar institution," Jim Crow and all his friends, it would be criminal for us (black people) once again to emulate the oppressor and fail to educate and counsel our own! □



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