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Nurturing Aspirations and Potential Theory of Excellence: Career Development of African American Boys

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Nurturing Aspirations and Potential Theory of Excellence (NAP Theory) maintains that excellence is the most essential standard by which to promote the successful career development of African American boys. It is a conceptual benchmark that is overarching and transcendent, consistent across domains (e.g., academic, social, career) and settings (e.g., school, home, work). Excellence is the quality or state of being outstanding and is the opposite of mediocrity. Applied to NAP Theory, outstanding quality or merited distinction is effort based and not ability based.

Though excellence is the sole criterion in this career development theory, it is individually calibrated; however, excellence is not compromised under any circumstances (e.g., deficient educational background, inadequate parenting, impoverished community), else the essence of the theory is violated (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). NAP Theory holds that all African American boys are capable of excellence. Furthermore, excellence as a career development mechanism is practical and enduring, and appreciates over the life span.

As the fundamental guiding principle in the successful career development of African American boys, NAP Theory specifically defines excellence as a state of (a) awareness of one's potential and (b) performance perseverance at the highest level of one's ability, in all areas necessary to achieve one's dreams, regardless of circumstances. An African American boy nurtured with excellence as just described has this attitude: "I know that I am talented. My talent and my perseverance toward excellence will allow me to accomplish my dreams."

The central premise of NAP Theory is that all African American boys have potential, which is the initial form of excellence. *Potential* is defined as the promise of excellence within each African American boy. The origin of potential can be abstractly identified as spiritual and ancestral and is evidenced in the legacy of African Americans. African Americans, through utilization of their potential, overcame slavery and legal segregation, although racism and discrimination still

exist, to establish a relative place of equity in American society (Franklin & Moss, 2002). Such potential for excellence is conceptualized by NAP Theory to be socially transmitted from one generation of African Americans to the next. Whether or not this explains the genesis of potential or if the actual potential transmission process works in the way described, to take such a positive perspective gives the African American boy and those who work with him a useful and accurate social and historical foundation from which he can grow and develop.

This definition of potential, which is suggested to be a part of all African American boys, warrants consideration of other abstract concepts such as intelligence and aptitude, as well as more concrete realities such as disabilities (e.g., learning, physical). Notwithstanding these relevant issues and concerns, the basic concept of potential remains in tact. Consequently, African American boys have at least two relative sources or dimensions for their potential: (a) spiritual and/or ancestral potential and (b) characteristic potential that is uniquely theirs given their individuality (e.g., genetic, biological).

Aspirations are essential to career development and success of African American boys (Chung, Baskin, & Case, 1999; Gottfredson, 1996). To achieve excellence, potential has to be shaped, directed, and guided into an intentional, purposeful, and relatively structured force: aspiration. *Aspiration* is defined in NAP Theory as the career vision the African American boy has for himself. His vision can be essentially nonexistent, singular, or multifaceted and is likely reflective of his developmental stage, career-related guidance, and life experiences (Super, 1994). African American boys have varying degrees of exposure and access to diverse occupations, occupational information, and career role models. These experiences, or lack thereof, govern the ability of the African American boy to envision his own career path and lifestyle and moderate his career aspirations (Gottfredson, 1996; Vondracek & Kirchner, 1974).

There are at least three general ways that aspirations can develop. First, aspirations can be innate or interest and ability based, meaning they originate, derive, or develop in the absence of relative nurturance. Second, aspirations can have an experiential origin, meaning they developed from specific expectations, encouragement, education, and/or experiences that sparked certain interests and goals. Further, aspirations may develop through some combination of innate interests, abilities, and skills with career-related guidance and experiences.

A nurturing environment prepares and equips African American boys for career success. Alternatively, the absence of nurturance (neglect) sets the stage for suboptimal career development and negative outcomes. Four essential factors must be present to nurture the career development of African American boys: (a) expectations, (b) encouragement, (c) education, and (d) experiences.

The career development of the African American boy begins with the expectation that he is capable of excellence. Such an expectation initially comes from his social environment (e.g., parents, teachers, peers, significant adults). Expectations serve as goal templates for the African American boy before he is able to create goals for himself. For expectations to result in the greatest motivation, effort, performance, and satisfaction, they must be (a) specific, (b) developmentally challenging, and (c) assisted (i.e., help is provided to meet expectations or to achieve goals) (House & Baetz, 1979; Locke, 1970).

The African American boy then internalizes the positive expectations of his environment to create a realistic career vision for himself. As a result the African American boy believes in his own potential for excellence, expects to be successful, and adopts a success identity.

An African American boy who perceives either low or negative expectations for his success is likely not to perform at the level of his capabilities and have underdeveloped potential. He may also be unaware of his potential and evaluate his abilities negatively. If the negative expectations of his environment are internalized, his performance is likely to demonstrate what he has accepted, either consciously or unconsciously, is expected of him. Internalized negative expectations are evidenced in at least two ways: (a) the presence of nonexistent, limited, or stereotypical aspirations and (b) the ability to only envision a substandard lifestyle that may include poverty, crime, and/or unemployment.

Excellence and career success require commitment, hard work, determination, and perseverance. It is therefore essential that the

expectation of success be reinforced and supplemented by the encouragement of significant individuals in the African American boy's life. Parents, teachers, peers, and adults who encourage African American boys demonstrate their care and instill hope about present and future endeavors.

Encouragement conveys a sincere desire that the African American boy is successful and provides sustaining motivation during difficult challenges. It is more than simply saying, "I want you to be successful," though important and helpful; rather, it is consistently demonstrating this message in words that are congruent with behavior (i.e., actions). Encouragement is an active relational process through which an African American boy learns that he is important, his life matters, and he is expected to use his potential to become excellent and successful.

Additionally, encouragers of the African American boy are also his role models and his guides to a world beyond his current developmental landscape and social reality. Their behavior toward him ultimately influences his behaviors toward others, thereby creating a foundational reciprocal system of encouragement.

The lack or absence of encouragement is consistent with low expectations. It is difficult to encourage an African American boy if expectations for him are low or nonexistent. A paradoxical problem is created by low expectations and the lack of active encouragement for African American boys. The paradox is that low expectations and minimal encouragement are *still* a form of expectations and encouragement, albeit suboptimal, that can influence the career development of African American boys. These types of expectations and encouragement create negative energy in the environment of the African American boy that is more likely to lead to negative career outcomes (e.g., school dropout, incarceration, poverty).

Expectations and encouragement are the initiators for the process of excellence and career development which must be complemented by a quality education. Education provides infinitely adaptable personal resources that propel the career development process. For African American boys an education can also buffer some of the effects of racism through access to information, role models, and learning experiences that can help him develop efficacy in dealing with prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Such ability is ultimately paramount to his survival, achievement, and success in a career.

The quality and level of education are strongly correlated with career success, level of income, and other quality of life factors (Sharf, 2003). An appreciation for the value and utility of education also

continues to benefit self-motivated learners over the life span because they are able to think critically about situations, evaluate alternatives, adapt to circumstances, and make decisions in their best interests.

Low expectations and minimal encouragement also serve as an impediment in the educational context. Poor quality education and underperformance in school has far reaching consequences and can potentially limit career alternatives (Gottfredson, 1996). Another limitation created by neglect in the area of education is that the connection between education and the lifestyle desired by the African American boy is not made.

It is crucial that African American boys have a developmentally appropriate understanding of the relationship between their present educational situation and their future career situation and lifestyle. Perspective in this regard would help to make school and its related work more relevant, meaningful, and important to African American boys. As a result African American boys will become empowered learners vested in the fulfillment of their potential and in the accomplishment of their dreams.

High expectations, positive encouragement, and a quality education are most fortified with concrete career-related experiences. Material experiences are necessary to give African American boys an opportunity to identify with a career. They help him to develop vision (i.e., for his life) and perspective (i.e., developmental expansion). What he aspires to become is again ultimately governed by his exposure. This exposure should be thoughtful, intentional, purposeful, and developmentally appropriate.

An African American boy may find it difficult to connect his present activities (e.g., school) to his future position in life (e.g., career) and have a limited perspective of time (Super, 1994). Because of his developmental stage, he is better able to learn about careers through direct experiences with job sites (e.g., visiting an office) and interaction with employees (e.g., demonstrations, question and answer sessions).

If African American boys are intentionally exposed to diverse careers, given the opportunity to engage in supervised visits to job sites, and encouraged to ask questions and to explore, then their career world will expand, as will their interests and curiosity. Structured intentional exposure creates a perspective that is otherwise unattainable without the assistance of caring adults and has significant future implications. For example, how can an African American boy consider what is taking place in other parts of the world if no one has ever shown him that other parts of the world truly exist? What is the probability that Secretary General of the United Nations will be on his list of aspirations?

The absence of career related experiences in an environment of neglect serves to limit the aspirations of African American boys, consequently leaving their potential undeveloped. Without intentionally structured career related opportunities, what African American boys learn about various careers is likely to be correlated to their social environment including what they are exposed to through media (e.g., television, radio, Internet, video games, magazines). Such information is, by nature of the format and absence of a process component (i.e., an opportunity for discussion with the producer), limited and likely to be incomplete. Consequently, children develop a career base, structure, or template that is insufficient and difficult to build upon. Then it is not surprising, given the dearth of career-related exploratory opportunities, when some African American boys limit their aspirations to professional athletics and entertainment.

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