

Youth Engagement
and
Leadership Development
Solution Paper

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT FOCUS GROUPS

TUESDAY, APRIL 16, AND TUESDAY , APRIL 23 2013 6PM

Jacob Carruthers Center for Inner-City Studies

CO-FACILITATORS:

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April 16 PARTICIPANTS:

Christopher Reed (State Of Black Chicago Congress Steering Committee)

Jahmal Cole (Role Model Movement)

Enoch Muhammad (Hip-Hop Detoxx)

Maya Tatum, Chris Deanna, Nza-Ari Khepra, Victor Taylor (Project Orange Tree)

Ayesha Jaco (The Lupe Fiasco Foundation)

Kesha Wells (Hip-Hop Detoxx)

Alfred Defreecce (Roosevelt University Professor)

Melissa Ford (Clerk of The Circuit Court of Cook County's Office)

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April 23 PARTICIPANTS:

Christopher Reed (State Of Black Chicago Congress Steering Committee)

Nza-Ari Khepra, Victor Taylor, Laila Xhamilton (Project Orange Tree)

Alfred Defreعه (Roosevelt University Professor)

Rappin Tate Da Great (Hip Hop Artist)

Kandase Khepra (Project Orange Tree)

A few more participants were present but the sign-in sheet was lost therefore we are unable to report their names.

Purpose

The purpose of the State of Black Chicago Conference (SBCC) Youth Engagement and Leadership Development focus group was to convene an intergenerational group of community members to discuss how youth impact the community of African descent in Chicago, and to produce a solution paper that includes short and long term solutions to resolving problems associated with Youth Engagement and Leadership Development.

1. Statement of the Problem

The SBCC asked us as co-facilitators to begin the focus group discussion by coming up with the *Statement of the Problem*, defined as a succinct statement that details all problems and concerns associated with the issue of Youth Engagement and Leadership Development; and how these concerns affect the community of African descent in Chicago. If applicable, the statement was to include an answer to the following questions:

- Where is the problem located?
- Who is most impacted by the problem?
- What is the extent of this impact?
- How long has this problem existed?
- What factors have shaped the history and evolution of the problem?
- In what specific socioeconomic and political context does the problem exist?

Given that the problem-perspective focuses on maladaptive behaviors that support the hypothesis that cultural or psychological deficiencies are the cause of African American youths'

problems, we (co-facilitators) asked the participants not to solely focus on black youths' problems. Instead, we asked them to balance the problems with strengths. We know that discussions guided by the problem-perspective supports a narrow-minded view of black youths. Important questions should be addressed about black youths that not only focus narrowly on problems but also take into consideration the strengths and resiliencies of black youth.

Keeping in mind that a focus group is defined as an interview, not a discussion we directed our questions primarily to the youth present. A focus group interview is a qualitative method "with a primary aim of describing and understanding perceptions, interpretations, and beliefs of a select population to gain understanding of a particular issue from the perspective of the group's participants." The relatively small number of youth participants enabled an in-depth interview, facilitating interaction within the group; thus, youth participants were able to talk to each other (and others), rather than individually answering the facilitators' questions. When asked, "What are the greatest problems of Black Youth in Urban Areas?" the group collectively engaged in an in-depth discussion that produced the following problems:

1. Many Black Youths Have An Identity (cultural) Crisis
2. Many Black Youths' Need Help Mobilizing their Creativity
3. Too many Black Youths' are Desensitized to Violence and Trauma
4. Many Black Youths Don't Know Their Power
5. A Need for Non-judgmental Safe Spaces for Black Youths
6. A Dysfunctional Public Education System for Black Youths
7. Black Youths Need More Positive Role Models
8. Black Youths Need More Leadership Development Opportunities
9. Black Youths Need More Gateways to Higher Status

10. Many Black Youths Need Help Getting Touch With Their Inner Feelings

11. The Dehumanization of Black Youths In the Media.

12. More Accountability Needed in Youth Programming

Again, rather than focusing on the problem-perspective, the co-facilitators pushed the participants to come up with a list that placed emphasis on the cultural foundations of authentic and proactive responses to institutionalized barriers. As with any ethnic group, these subjective aspects of African-American culture are transmitted across generations and are often adapted in response to changing social or ecological imperatives. Most of the participants in our focus group disagreed with the notion that the most noticeable thing about African Americans is their lack of indigenous ethnic culture. Most believed that there is a unique African heritage as the prime source of adaptive African American cultural patterns. There were comments that indicated strong beliefs that African American youth may help identify indigenous ethnic resources that facilitate adaptive over pathological responses to oppressive role barriers. They commented on ethnic organizations, extended kinship bonds, flexible family roles, group consciousness, and religion may all be sources of empowerment for Black youth as they struggle with discouraging barriers in cherished social roles. Towards this end, the focus group responded to the following question, “What are Black youths’ greatest strengths?” the group collectively engaged in an in-depth discussion that produced the following strengths:

1. Black youths have strong individual identities
2. Black youths display empathy
3. Black youths have high levels of Resilience (Thrive despite tragedies)
4. Black youths are the Gatekeepers of cool around the globe

5. Black youths are Creative
6. Black youths are Resourceful
7. Black youths are Energetic

The strengths-perspective highlighted above acknowledges problems faced by black youth but looks beyond the problem-perspective. Black people with the strengths-orientation emphasize the importance of understanding processes that enable many high risk African American youth to avoid devastation, to struggle against adversity, and even to excel despite discouraging odds.

2. Relevant Data

Many black youths in Chicago reside in communities that are in a state of Education, Health and Community Development crisis. While relevant data tells how much a particular problem exists, it doesn't explain how systemic factors like poverty and institutionalized racism, among others are the root causes of the crises.

The Education Crises Black Youth are Faced With

- There are 60,000 dropouts in Chicago Public schools between the ages 13 to 21, enough to fill up Soldier Field (CPS, 2009)
- Over 30,000 dropouts in Chicago are African American (CPS, 2009)
- Nationally, in 42 states more African American Males graduate from high school than in the state of Illinois (Schott Foundation, 2012)
- In Illinois, 47% of African American Males graduate from high school as compared to 81% of white males (Schott Foundation, 2012)

The Health Crises Black Youth are Faced With

- There are 77 communities in Chicago, 20 communities have the highest murder rates in the city (CDPH, 2011)
- 19 of the 20 with the highest murder rates are in African American neighborhoods (CDPH, 2011)
- African Americans account for almost half of the people living with HIV in Illinois. But even within that population, there's a sub-group that's disproportionately affected:
- AA adolescents: Illinois Adolescents living with HIV/AIDS in 2009

Black males 1375	White males 654
Black females 498	White females 124
Hispanic males 435	Hispanic females 93

The Community Development Crises Black Youth are Faced With

Food Deserts:

- In Chicago, 383,000 people do not have easy access to healthy food (Gallagher, 2011)
- Most of these food deserts are in predominately African American communities (Gallagher, 2011)

Unemployment:

- Chicago ranks the third highest unemployment rate among African Americans in the nation (EPI, 2012)
- 50% of African American teenagers in Illinois are unemployed. In Chicago 89% of African American teenagers are unemployed.

3. Short term and long term solutions to resolving the problem.

Based on the problem list that was produced in focus group one, we used focus group two to attach short term and long term solutions to each problem presented. When asked, “Specifically, what must be done to resolve the problem in the short term and in the long term?” the following items were listed:

Issue #1 The Identity Crisis

The focus group participants were very passionate about the short and long term solutions to black youths’ individual identity problems. One youth suggested that we, “Teach children it’s okay to be themselves” and another youth said “stop “forcing” education and give options. Show the youth real examples as opposed to just talking.” There was a great deal of discussion around teaching black youth their history as a means to alleviate the identity crises so many black youth suffer from. One youth suggested that we, “Offer more black history in school, enforce the law that supports that.” While most participants agreed that there needed to be a concerted effort to enforce the State of Illinois mandate that Black History be taught in all State of Illinois public schools, the challenge is that there is a decreasing number of African American teachers in the system. One adult participant asked the question, “What do you think about non-blacks teaching black and African history? A student responded by saying, “It doesn’t strengthen

you at all,” meaning non-black teachers are not capable of teaching Black or African History in a way it will empower black youths.

As it relates to individual identity and black youth, an adult asked the youth, “Are there enough “good” black images and information out there for you all?” One youth responded by saying, “everything looks like oppression” and another youth agreed that the history that they are usually taught is “mostly sad, depressing history.” To clarify the students’ sentiments, an adult asked if there was a, “Need for more uplifting stories...at least a healthy balance in the type of history being taught to black youths.” A youth responded in agreement saying that, “Slavery should only be learned once.” This comment ended up having a profound impact on the youth’s perception of their involvement with the focus group. In fact, they asked that their sentiments be included in the report because they thought it might explain why youth are often reluctant to share their ideas with adults.

One adult interpreted the youth’s comment about “slavery” to mean that the youths were tired of hearing about slavery. This same adult then proceeded to report this comment to a large group of adults at an SBCC community meeting. Of course, upset by what they had been told, many adults made critical comments about the youths’ disregard for the history of slavery. Later, when the youths were informed of what had been said about them, they were very upset as well. They felt that their comments had been intentionally taken out of context. The youth said that they were not saying they didn’t want to learn about slavery. They said they were commenting on how slavery tends to be the only aspect of Black History taught. They said they were tired of being inundated with only slavery when black people have a long and inspiring history before, during and after the slave era. Another interesting comment a youth made about what she perceived to be an intentional misrepresentation of the slavery reference was, “we (youth) can’t

trust adults...they always lie about what we say to make us look bad so they can look good.” In fact, after they learned they had been criticized in an open meeting, for something that was misrepresented, some of the youth said they didn’t want to return to anymore SBCC focus groups. Fortunately, there were no more focus groups scheduled.

Last, with regards to the short and long term solutions to the problem of individual identify, the question was asked, “How do we create excitement in teaching history?” An adult responded by offering the use of the “schoolhouse rock method to teach” history.

Issue #2 Many Black Youths’ Need Help Mobilizing their Creativity

In an attempt to understand what short term solutions can be used to help operationalize black youths’ creativity, an adult asked the youths, all of who were members of Project Orange Tree, an awareness campaign created to bring about change and action against structural violence-- food deserts, an apartheid school system, Black economic exploitation, the public housing crisis, etc. in Chicago, “How can we raise the frequency for youth who are vibrating lower? What sparked Project Orange Tree?” In response to the question, one of the Project Orange Tree youth said, “The fact that Project Orange Tree was youth driven helped stimulate national attention.” Another Project Orange Tree member agreed with the comment and added, “we (Project Orange Tree youth) put thought, intent and care behind Project Orange Tree.” However, one adult commented that it was Lupe Fiasco’s name attached to the project that gave it its notoriety. The adult went on to ask the youth if they felt Project Orange Tree worked. One Project Orange Tree youth said, “Yes, we achieved our goal of raising the awareness of structural violence.” If Project Orange Tree is an example of black youths’ creativity, then

encouraging youth led initiatives that are well planned and thought out may be a short term solution to enhancing black youths creativity.

Issue #3 Too many Black Youths' are Desensitized to Violence and Trauma

There was a great deal of commentary in the focus group about the negative affects the media has on black youth and their perceptions of violence and risky behaviors. Many believed that the media is a negative influence in the lives of black youth that causes them to be desensitized to violence. As a solution to this problem one young man suggested, "expose them (youth) to the brutal and harsh realities of what they are doing." An adult agreed and told of, "Watching an extremely graphic drug documentary in grammar school that deterred her from harsh drugs."

Issue #4 Black Youth don't know their power

Another issue that was raised as a problem for black youths is that they don't know their collective power. One youth offered the idea of, "Giving them (black youths) opportunities to exercise their power as a solution to their sense of powerlessness." Many in the discussion also felt strongly that given the right opportunities, black youth who lived in violent and dysfunctional environments would be empowered to change things in their lives that they were uncomfortable with.

Issue #5 Lack of non-judgmental safe spaces for intergenerational and peer-to-peer dialog

Due to time constraints the focus group did not get a chance to come up with short and longer term solutions to the problem of black youth lacking non-judgmental safe spaces for intergenerational and peer-to-peer dialog.

Issue #6 Poor and dysfunctional public education system

The crisis in public education in Chicago was probably the most commented on topic in this focus group. There were many comments on the negative impact attending dysfunctional schools had on the lives of black youths. This is an area highly recommended for further discussion.

There is also a need address the increasing enrollment of high-risk students in alternative classes, increasing parental involvement, and increasing the parents' access to teachers. There is a need for school programs that attempt to change teacher practices. Changing school organizational structure was expressed repeatedly.

Issue #7 Lack of positive role models

Many youth and a few adults in the focus group supported the ideology that strong bonds with black role models, may combine with the successful resolution of female and male life conflicts to facilitate prosocial development. However, one adult stressed that there is, "Not a lack of positive role models, but a lack of visibility and exposure to them." Nevertheless, it was commonly agreed that black youth need more access to positive role models to further their healthy growth and development.

Issue #8 Lack of leadership development

One of the biggest problems black you are faced with is the lack of leadership development opportunities. There are very few programs that serve to prepare black youth to serve as leaders and peer mentors. Happily, one of the Project Orange Tree youths informed us that they, "Intend to extend Project Orange Tree to other satellite locations. Hopefully, with the expansion of Project Orange Tree and other programs like it, black youths will be afforded more opportunities to get more leadership opportunities.

Issue #9 Lack of Gateways to get Higher Positions

Although the language of higher positions implies employment opportunities, the youth meant it in a more personal way. In other words, they felt black youths needed more opportunities to progress in the world. One youth used the phrase, “Getting unstuck.” It is cultural rites of passage models that are offered here as short and long term solutions to helping black youths get “unstuck.” These rites of passage programs use transitional initiation rites to instill youth with an African-cultural social ethos, thereby promoting a sense of purpose and meaning

Issue #10 Lack of Internal Identification with Feelings

It was recommended in the focus group that black youths need to be exposed to processes that help them get in touch with their feelings. It was suggested that an inward journey to self might solve important role strain by clarifying major life roles, e.g., manhood and womanhood clarification, and by helping young people through life transitions, e.g., bonding, stressful events, and other transient life problems.

Issue #11 Lack of positivity in media

The mass media is one of the major societal central institutions that allow industries or companies to send messages to a large number of people. In recent years less than ten multinational media conglomerates have gobbled up most media industries amassing an incredible amount of clout that they use to impose European cultural imperialism and hegemony on the world. As culture producing industries, the mass media has the power to colonize the minds of black youths in a way that influences them to become hyper-consumers and adopters of an anti-social youth culture. One youth suggested that the only way to combat this problem is for forward thinking black people to, “start our on media.”

Issue #12 Lack of Accountability in Youth Programming

The lack of accountability in youth programming designed to serve black youths is problematic. The lack of administrative, ethical, and fiscal accountability among others, serve as barriers to effective youth programming. Obviously, more community, local, state, and national monitoring of public and private youth programs need to be implemented to ensure the appropriate oversight of these programs.

4. Strategies involved in resolving the problems

The strategies vital to resolving the problems identified in this focus group include mobilizing essential processes like community building, economic and self-empowerment, communalism, empathy and spirituality to retool black youths to be culturally competent

5. Key Stakeholders

Black youths, parents, faith leaders, youth workers, educators, elected officials, activists, among others who seek to develop appropriate youth engagement and youth development programs.

6. Sustainability

In order for the youth engagement and leadership development initiatives to have sustainability among youths they have to be authenticated by youth themselves. Moreover, some consideration must be given to black youths' ability to address their own problems, utilizing their natural resources. Some refer to this concept as empowerment. It is believed that empowered youths have a greater potential for long-term maintenance and sustainability.