A Note on the Effects of Language on the Perception of Racial Groups by Majority Group Members

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Introduction

From birth children are labeled, motivated and, unfortunately, sometimes stifled by words. Whether it is in the home, community, or in the school, it is obvious that they cannot escape words and their influence. While all children are sometimes negatively affected by words, it seems as if the devastation is often overwhelming for the African-American boys.

Most educators have for some years recognized the importance of self-esteem in relationship to academic performance. Yet, few seem to correlate the self-esteem and academic performance to the use of words. As educators, on a daily basis, we must recognize the power of words to make and break our young. Furthermore, we must be vigilant in leading others who impact upon the child to recognize the same and encouraging them to make and not break our young.

Many African-American males are dying by the hands of violence. This death is highly documented, but a subtle death is simultaneously occurring and going undocumented among the same population. It is a death by words. Negative words dominate their existence. They hear them at home, on the street, and in school.

Like other children, African-American males form their self-perception from significant others in their lives as well as surrounding conditions and circumstances. They encounter several hundred messages from their homes, communities, television, movies, and videos that limit, restrict, deflate, and destroy their dreams and negatively impact their views of themselves. These messages are often met with anger and frustration as these young men find themselves facing a bleak future. Hopelessness, alienation, and helplessness emerge in their behavior patterns as they unleash their penned up emotions on their teachers, classmates, friends, family members, and strangers, but more often other African-American males.

Given these alarming circumstances this article will:

(a) address the power of words as they are used in the home, school and community;

(b) underscore the importance of parents and educators being mindful of the potency of words; (c) stress the need for thoughtful use of words; and

(d) finally suggest verbal pitfalls to avoid in dealing with African-American males.

What's in a name?

"Sticks and stone may break my bones, but names will never harm me "

Anonymous

Little did we know when we chanted this saying how untrue it was. Names have a long-lasting effect on us, starting with something as basic as our name. Names often suggest qualities and characteristics of people, as pointed out by Canfield and Wells (1994). They state that names like Philip meant "Lover of horse," Peter meant "rock or stone," Henry meant "home ruler," Margaret meant "a pearl," and Judith meant "admired or praised." Last names like Cooper referred to "a man who made barrels", just as Smith meant "a blacksmith."

In biblical times names were regarded as closely related to the nature of the bearer (Martin, 1964). With this in mind and after conferring with many parents, it appears that more African Ameri-

can parents are reaching back to their African ancestry for names that connote strength.

It is important for educators and others to respect these names, rather than finding humor in them. Recognizing that negative associations and images can also be evoked by personal names, Canfield and Wells (1994) quoted Susan Robles who recommended that teachers combat this by teaching youngsters to take pride in the names they have been given. Additionally, educators should be ever mindful of the impact of names, even when they come in the form of labels such as "liar", "cheater", "thief", "stupid", "dummy" or "dunce."

Words and Self

How are thoughts generally transmitted? In words! Words that for the young African American male are too often viewed as deflating (Hutchinson, 1994; Foster, 1986). Henry David Thoreau (1854/ 1969) said "what a man thinks of himself, that is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate" (p. 10). With this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why the young African American male's fate doesn't look promising since he doesn't believe in himself, doesn't have faith, doesn't believe that he can be the "master of his fate" or "the captain of his soul." Giamatti (1984), the President of Yale University, analyzed Renaissance literature and concluded that to the Renaissance man "words were units of energy" and through their use "man could assume forms and aspire to shapes otherwise beyond his reach" (p. 103). Many African American young males never experience the helium effect of words. Hutchinson (1994), citing a questionnaire in which Black Enterprise Magazine asked blacks "if their hopes and aspirations were the same as the white middle class," noted that 61% said "yes." He concluded that the reason more than 61 % didn't agree was because America eternally finds nasty little ways to remind Black folks that they are still "niggers."

Bachrach (1985) in her introduction to *Slogans and Euphemisms* noted that with people who have severe and persistent mental disabilities, "words are immensely powerful devices" (p. 7) and very much control the dimensions of the mental health service system. Referring to the field of psychiatry, she stated that "words are used to mollify, evade, inflame and incite" (p. 7). Although Bachrach was speaking to her fellow Psychiatrists, I think her advice is appli-

cable to educators. She advises that "we need to work hard to educate ourselves to understand the power of words, as Giamatti described it — so that we can control them instead of letting them control us" (p.32). This is more important as we analyze the impact of words on our young.

Words in the Home

The development of self does not begin in formal school; it begins in the home with the child's first teachers, the parents and other family members. It is here that "the self evolves and thrives in the course of significant social interaction" (Johnson, 1992, p. 439). While the majority of what is transmitted is positive, in many instances it is not. "You are no good just like your daddy," "You act like a little sissy," " will never be anything," and "You are so dumb" are just a few of the deflating verbally abusives that parents have made. It is apparent that too many parents feel comfortable in using such put downs. What disturbs me most is that these damaging remarks are often made during the early, formative years of the child's life when he is forming the self-concept and personality are forming. Abatso and Abatso (1992) noted:

> ...young people come here as babies, without any self feelings. They develop a sense of self as they evaluate the perception of other people toward them. If they have fathers and mothers who call them ugly names, the name calling will prevent them from feeling a sense of respect. (p. 17)

Kelley (1962) stressed "the...self feeds on ideas, which come from other people" ·p. 15). These thoughts are internalized and sometimes actualized. With the enormous amount of "put downs," almost on a daily basis, many young African-American males grow up without being able to develop a sense of specialness or a sense of uniqueness. Without this sense, the risk of failure is increased.

Of a less threatening, but just as devastating, nature, we hear parents saying, "You are a bad boy" or "I couldn't do math when I was a child so I don't expect you to do well in math." It is not surprising when children respond to these self-fulfilling prophecies. After all, the parents did the mind-setting.

Twenty-six years as a public school educator and four years as the administrator of a black male youth mentoring program lead me

to believe this mind-setting is devastating in some African-American homes. The verbal abuse seems pronounced. Many parents are unhappy, stressed out and overwhelmed with problems. Misery appears to love company and is transferred through words. African-American young males are often verbally bashed and learn to do the same to others. Their lack of a sense of uniqueness, their lack of purpose, the instability of their lives often leave them feeling invisible. Awareness of the power of words and a new sensitivity to avoiding negative words can reverse this trend.

Peers and Words

The next set of molders of self-esteem are the child's peers. Almost all children have nicknames and many of them come from their peers. Some are complimentary, but many target explicit weaknesses. Canfield & Wells (1994) state that they are the most damaging and persistent occurrences of childhood. Thus, we hear children calling each other names such as Stinky, Dog, Butterball, Dumbo, Big Head, Baldy, Fatso, Skinny, Four Eyes, etc. Canfield and Wells (1994) concluded that "there may not be a young person anywhere who has not felt the sting of another's remark" ·p. 78).

Given the predominance of "jiving" in African-American communities, the sting often becomes more like a shark attack. Little is sacred or off limits. According to Kunmjufu (1986), "Black boys value their peers', walk, hat, "rap," and signifyin' more than anything else" (p. 160). Foster (1986) in his book Ribbin' Jivin', and Playin' the Dozens pointed out that black males, as well as almost all lower class urban male groups, play verbally and physically aggressive street corner games to a degree that they become semi-ritualized. The behavior consists of ongoing encounters intended to show skillfulness and superiority of one person over the other. He noted that African-American inner-city youngsters, especially males, have mastered the art of teasing, razzing, kidding, ranking, and denigrating the achievements and characteristics of others. Any error or physical defect or irregularity becomes a negative focus.

Children can be cruel to one another. It has long been known that how others feel about us helps determine in a large degree how we feel about ourselves. Bean (1992) called this the sense of connectiveness. With the barrage of negatives children hurl at one

another, especially among young African-American males, it is a miracle our young have any self-esteem at all. Canfield and Wells (1994) suggested that the trend can be reversed by having children give each other nicknames based on strengths, for example, Champ, Hoop (for a good basketball player) and Rocky (for a strong person).

Words and the Schooling Process

When children attend school, we can exacerbate the situation with remarks like "How can you be so stupid?" which translates into the child's mind "I am stupid." We say "that's dumb" and the child hears "You are dumb." If a teacher says "I've got my education; if you don't want to learn, then I don't care if you don't get your education," the child decodes this as "she doesn't care about me." "I'm sick and tired of your behavior" may be decoded as "she doesn't like me." Miller (1982) noted that children have an increasing ability to see themselves as objects to which actions or thought are directed by verbal symbols. African-American children at no different in this regard. In summary, Moustakas (1956) stated that meaning is not given; it is constructed.

Too many African-American young males have not fared well in school. They frequently "turn off to schooling, become underachievers and often are labeled and placed in special education programs. In a quest for academic excellence for these youth one may look at research on effective schools. Brookover and Lezotte (1984) isolated five correlates of school effectiveness. One of those identified was "high expectation." The though behind it was that students will rise to our expectations. Our expectations of others are expressed in words — words that can motivate or devastate. Johnson (1992) noted that school facilitates the child's emerging construction of self" and "the language environment of school learning constitutes a social context that is essential to the development of selfhood". p. 439). Johnson underscored the significance of others in the development of selfhood. She added "the potential that lies within each individual is realized only through social interaction" (p. 440). Scheffler (1991) said that the goal is maximal self-realization. Johnson (1992) noted "It is therefore of utmost importance that careful attention be given to the quality of these formal social interactive experiences and what the child can learn from them (p. 440). She added that as children

become adept in using verbal symbols, they become more able to meet the behavioral demands and expectations of others. This underscores the need for high expectations expressed through our words and behavior (behavior speaks too).

Chenfeld (1985), a teacher in Columbus, Ohio, who questioned when do we stop the celebration of learning, stated:

Language is the core, the key, the foundation of every class, subject, activity, the relationship. We should say languages — the language of the textbooks, printed materials, curriculum resources; the language of daily events — the give and take, instructions, directions, announcements, reactions, questions and conversations; the language of feelings — the "life and death" of the spirit conveyed through verbal and nonverbal communication; the power of the language of the teacher in helping children learn and grow together or the flip side of that power — the language of the teacher that conveys to children, "You're dumb. Look at those mistakes. This isn't good." The language of the shrinking of the spirit (p. 267).

Chenfeld (1985) called a "Yes" teacher one who maintains a philosophy stamped with respect and regard for children, contrasting it with a 'No" teacher using a teaching situation to illustrate her meaning. In an example of the one situation, first graders were instructed to make a clock and be sure that all the numbers of the hours were written clearly. One child jumped into the assignment with enthusiasm. She carefully wrote the twelve numbers of the clock on a round paper plate. They were perfect, so beautiful that she decorated each number with a tiny flower around it. The teacher broke the spirit of the child by responding with a huge x across the face of the clock. Also angrily written (It scratched so deeply it tore the paper) was the message "Did not follow instructions."

Chenfeld cited an old Yiddish custom, "When young children completed a page of study, their teacher dropped a dot of honey on the bottom of the page. The children were encouraged to dip their finger in the honey and taste its sweetness" (p. 268). She insisted that learning should always be sweet. Whether learning will be sweet or not depends on the words, verbal or written, that we choose as educators.

Thomas (1991) said "most educators agree that the use of positive reinforcement can have a powerful impact on student behavior.

They know when positive reinforcement is used consistently, it encourages desirable or appropriate behavior while modifying or extinguishing undesirable behavior " (p. 32). He added:

> The appropriate use of positive reinforcement is a vital skill in the overall pattern of delivering effective instruction. It can improve a student's self concept, promote participation in classroom activities, and modify or extinguish inappropriate behavior. Reinforcement can be physical like pat on the back, or it can be nonverbal, like a smile or nod; but it has the most impact when it is given verbally. (p. 33)

In a longitudinal case study relating academic failure to language, namely labeling, Juliebo and Elliott (1984) followed a child from birth to approximately age eight. They record his early success with learning language and reading skill, and then discuss his academic decline after being labeled a low achiever and a candidate for remedial classes. Given the label "remedial student" in grade two, this once bright, enthusiastic child adopted the label and behaved as a slow learner would. His school work continued to decline. A transfer to another school was the beginning of the child's academic salvation. His teacher, using words, began to rebuild his self-concept, rewarding him for improved work and encouraging his endeavors. The school year ended with the child having Bs in all areas of language arts. By the end of grade four he was awarded a commendation as the "Most Improved Student" in front of the whole school. Juliebo and Elliott (1984) concluded the study noting that whether or not the child will continue to grow positively depends on whether he again will meet a teacher who will destroy an already fragile self-concept.

Kirp (1974) observed that "adverse classification stigmatizes students, reducing both their self-image and their worth in the eyes of others' (pp. 12-13). Apple (1976) said we do not help children by using clinical and psychological labels, instead we place them in "educational slots." Interestingly, Juliebo and Elliott (1984) added:

> Labelling of course does not only refer to testing deviant behavior. Every time we write a comment on a child's writing, we are labelling. It does not take a kindergarten child long to realize that the "bluebirds" are brighter than

the "canaries." Often too we only focus on cognitive labelling and affective problems are relegated to the unimportant. (p. 9)

Haynes (1986) reviewed perspectives underlying study skills. Under the motivational perspective, he identified *attribution* — "the assumption is that the tendency to attribute academic success or failure to certain causes can generate feelings of competence or incompetence in students and affect their subsequent performance", p. 3) and *self-esteem* — "the assumption is that the self-perceptions that students hold relative to their ability in certain subject areas influence their approach to studying and their performance in those subject areas" (p. 4). I believe both of these are affected by the verbal and written language. Both are determined by positive and negative messages one receives from others. Haynes (1986) pointed out:

many students experience difficulty in school, not because of low intelligence, lack of ability or even lack of effort, but because they have made the assessment that they are incapable of performing well. Somehow, somewhere, from someone they received a negative message about their capability, internalized it, believed it and it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (p. 7)

Holiday (1991), in a brilliant discourse on how William Shakespeare wrote several plays (*The Merchant of Venice, The Tempest, Othello* and *Titus Andronicus*) which depict Jews and blacks in a very negative , stereotypical fashion, noted "the power of the pen" to bring injury to a person or group. He concluded that "words, whether spoken or written, are powerful in their expression" (p. 25). Haynes (1986) pointed out that the parasympathetic nervous system cannot be ignored because of its centrality in motivating and directing behavior. Likewise, the power of words cannot be ignored. Purkey (1991) combined the concept of invitations and disinvitations with the constructs intentionality and unintentionality to create four levels wherein people/educators function. They are (1) internally disinviting —, At this level people purposely behave in a harmful and destructive level towards themselves and others. They intend to demean, degrade, and destroy the value and work of themselves and others; (2) Unintentionally disinviting — At this level people behave in careless and thoughtless ways and their actions are seen as being disinviting toward others despite their best intentions. Their behav-

iors are ill-timed, poorly planned, misguided and extravagant. When messages are misinterpreted, gestures can be offensive and actions unclear. While the harm is unintended the damage still occurs; (3) Unintentionally inviting — At this level people note positive results but are uncertain what they did to achieve them. This leads to a lack of consistency; and (4) Intentionally inviting — This is the highest level of professional functioning. At this level people demonstrate an effective command of helping skills, a broad knowledge base and unconditional acceptance and regard for themselves and others. They consistently create messages and invitations enabling themselves and others to feel valued and worthwhile. These beneficial messages become the building blocks upon which to construct a healthy, well-functioning self-concept.

Purkey (1991) gave examples of unintentionally disinviting forces at work and seen in almost any school — the sign that reads "No Students Allowed in School Before 8:15 a.m." (although the temperature is below zero), or the teacher who consistently victimizes students with the "buts.' ("This is a good paper, Mary, but…").

Many urban schools, where the majority of African-American male youth are enrolled, are not seen as intentionally inviting. It should be the goal of all our schools to become intentionally inviting with staffs that practice behaviors and advocate policies, programs and processes that are intentionally inviting. Certainly the words we verbalize and write must be positive for this goal to be achieved.

In the real world we are faced, as Giamatti (1984) stated, "with symbols, codes and convention that may not simply shatter us but may also give our lives meaning and coherence" (p. 70). The bottom line is that words do have power. They have the power to build up people and convey the message that they are capable, while other words have the power to tear down people, leaving them with the impression that they are not valuable or capable. Unfortunately, too many African-American young males have experienced the negative messages of words.

Words and the Media

Hutchinson (1994) in the *Assassination of the Black Male Image* summed up how the media uses words in relationship to the African-American male as "the fine art of black male bashing" (p. 19). He referred to the Stuart murder in Boston where Chuck Stuart

killed his pregnant wife and blames it on a black man. Instantly, the media pumped up the unfortunate matter by printing horrorific stories about violence-prone young black men terrorizing the city. The authorities arrested thirty-nine-year-old Willie Bennett, an ex-convict with a long list of arrests. Hutchinson stated, "It probably would have worked, except for a few doubters who didn't just read the newspapers, they read Chuck Stuart" (p. 21). In truth, Stuart had brutally killed his wife.

When black leaders protested the coverage, the media retorted, "We're just doing our job and reporting the news" (Hutchinson, p. 21). The issues, however, with the black leaders was not the coverage, but the type of coverage. A Well-read, analytical person has to conclude that the press obsessively focuses on criminal acts by some blacks and excludes the good acts of so many others. The mind set seems to be that crime, especially black crime, sells papers. Look at the sensationalism with the Mike Tyson and O.J. Simpson cases and how the white American press allowed suppressed images of the black male to surface. In his book, Hutchinson gave many examples of "black male bashing" and noted that today "editors lace their features on African Americans with terms such as 'crime prone,' 'crack heads,' 'educational cripples,' 'poverty ravaged' and 'gang ridden.' (p. 22).

The media answers to nobody. It has power and exercises it recklessly when it comes to African-American males. Willie Bennett is just one example of an African-American man destroyed by racial, stereotypical words of the media. What about the law-abiding young black men who experience discrimination that stems from the fear of those who shiver at the mention of young black man? What does this widespread, predominant image do to innocent young African-American males who do not commit crimes or participate in gang activity and who are not menaces to society? First, it causes them to see themselves as others see them, in negative stereotypical terms.

If they survive negative indoctrination, often the young black negative image overwhelms them with obstacles that give them a defeatist attitude. Perceived as the "bogie man," the bottom line is they become the "losers," the real victims of words. If America is to assure that all of its citizens are productive, we must begin to hold the media accountable. Remember, there is no neutrality in life; if a

citizen is not contributing to the quality of life, he is subtracting from the quality of life. We can no longer afford to create social cripples stemming from ignorance and bigotry.

Words and Entertainment

Focusing on television and the entertainment industry, we can identify another influencer of self. It is believed that too many words used on television are damaging, especially for minorities. Raps are the new rage among our youth. There are stations that broadcast continuous music videos, most of them using rap music as the new medium. When one can understand what is said, often what we hear is derogatory. Without a doubt the message is too often counterproductive and negative as we mold values and virtues. Note that Bean (1992) identified values and virtues as another condition of self.

It is suspected that the movie industry has convinced whites and far too many African-Americans that the gangster lifestyle is synonymous with the young black lifestyle. In the black hype movies young African-

American brothers address African-American sisters as "bitches" and "hoes," call each other "nigger" as well as cuss, fight and shoot each other. White theatre patrons leave with their impressions of African Americans confirmed; but the sad thing about it is that our young African-American males leaving thinking that their words and behaviors on the screens are true representations of them. Words affect frames of reference. These frames of reference affect behavior. Now we have even more "Boyz in the Hood." Let's break the cycle.

Conclusion

Negative statements, put-downs have no place in life, especially in school. Parents must come to grips with this. The school, via its agents (teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and other staff members) must be ever mindful of this. We must select our words with wisdom, choosing the positive over the negative, eliminating disinviting language from our vocabulary and professional repertoire. We can choose to be a "beneficial presence" in the lives of children rather than a "lethal presence" in both what we say and do. Then and only then will words give positive self-definition and lead to positive life fulfillment.

African Americans have survived being kidnapped form their native homeland, the atrocities of slavery, the discrimination and bigotry embedded in the fabric of America, will the African-American male, however, survive the subtle, slow death of verbal abuse? Whether they do or not might depend on whether or not we recognize the power of negative words and adjust our language accordingly.

We need to consider the role that schools and society in general have in creating low self-esteem in children. That is, students do not simply develop poor self-concepts out of the blue.

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Sonia Nieto
Affirming Diversity

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