

**2007-2008  
Leadership Seminar Series**

**The Education of Black Male Youth:  
Understanding the Social, Emotional, and Learning Lives of black Male Students**

Sponsored by  
**The Delores Walker Johnson  
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documentation by **Project for School Innovation**



**PLAYING WITH ANGER**  
*Engaging the Emotional Lives of Black Boys in Schools*

**December 10, 2007**

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Dr. Stevenson is an associate professor and director of the Professional Counseling and Psychology Program (PCAP) in the Applied Psychology and Human Development Division at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1993, Dr. Stevenson received the W. T. Grant Foundation's Faculty Scholar Award, a national research award given to only five researchers per year which funds five years of research. In 1995, Dr. Stevenson served as a member of a 12-member academic panel to consult on the development of a National Strategic Action Plan for African-American Males, sponsored by the National Drug Control Policy Office in the Office of the President. His research and consultation work identify cultural strengths that exist within families and seek to integrate those strengths in interventions to improve the psychological adjustment of children and adolescents and families. From 1998 to 2003, he directed two research projects funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. The first, entitled PLAAY (Preventing Long-term Anger and Aggression in Youth) involved basketball, martial arts, and bonding in family interventions to help youth with histories of aggression to manage their anger within school settings. The second project involves the Success of African American Students in Independent Schools (SAAS) and involved understanding the protective role of racial identity and racial socialization processes in the development of emotional coping strategies for African-American students and families in predominantly White independent schools.

**Learning Objective 1:** Participants will be exposed to a model of racial, ethnic, and cultural socialization that aids in identifying culturally relevant engagement with Black male youth.

**Learning Objective 2:** Learn how racism as a societal phenomenon and cultural socialization can influence psychological functioning of individuals and families.

**Learning Objective 3:** Learn how culturally relevant thinking, style, and physical engagement can increase attachments to Black male youth with a history of aggression.

Dr. Stevenson began his talk by explaining how his personal history influences his work with Black Boys in schools. He offered several quotations to ground his work, including a selection from “The Dark Tower” by Countee Cullen: *So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds / And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.* These boys, said Dr. Stevenson, are our agonizing seeds, and as adults we struggle to make sense of their lives. One of the most challenging issues in this work is how few people respond to boys as if they’re boys; they respond to them as men, and as consequence prescribe mainly “control” interventions that inhibit the naturally conflicted development of youth.

Dr. Stevenson contextualized his work within “racial, ethnic, and cultural socialization,” where Black Boys (and people in general) must be aware of the societal constrictions in which they operate, but also aware of each individual’s identity, talent, and potential. Unfortunately, Black Boys live in a systemic environment that is deeply racist – a dynamic Dr. Stevenson referred to as “Catch-33,” or “just damned,” to reflect a greater level of racism awareness than the “damned if you do damned if you don’t” dilemma in a Catch-22. However, some students do not detect racism in their daily experience; it requires “meta-cognition” to find patterns between examples such as how long it takes trash to get picked up or police to arrive in your neighborhood, the arrest rates of Black and Latino students unaccounted for by socio-economic status, the number of men who get stopped for “DWB – Driving While Black,” and the disproportionate rate of expulsion for African American preschoolers. Once students become aware of how this systemic “matrix” intersects with their lives, Dr. Stevenson said, the challenge becomes “rejecting definitions of yourself within paradigms that seek your self-destruction.” This involves personal empowerment to combat stereotype, and also supportive school / out-of-school structures that bring cultural pride, relevant connection, and physical engagement to a disenfranchised population of students.

Dr. Stevenson directs one such program for Black Boys – Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression in Youth, or PLAAY. PLAAY has several facets:

- ◆ TEAM – Teaching Empowerment through Athletic Movement, where basketball is a “game of identity expression.” Special emphasis is placed on moments of aggression where masculinity / ego identity are played out, and practitioners encourage students to defuse or channel their frustration while “in the moment.”
- ◆ CPR – Cultural Pride Reinforcement – is an “anti-violence cultural socialization program.” Students learn to be critically conscious of their identity and actions, and to channel their strong feelings in a culturally relevant “Black barbershop” atmosphere. They learn how to be angry, bring their passions to an argument, but to control those passions.
- ◆ MAAR – Martial Arts Anger Reduction is similar to the basketball program in channeling aggression, but has less trash talking and focuses more on internal and external balance and awareness.
- ◆ COPE – Community Outreach through Parent Engagement
- ◆ ROPE – Rites of Passage Empowerment.

Dr. Stevenson focused on two themes that run through the PLAAY program – *movement* and “in the moment” *emotion* – but are especially emphasized in basketball and martial arts programming. Movement, particularly for boys, is a way to deal with stress, a way of coping, of dealing with anger. It expresses personal style, identity, and history – often in deeper ways than speech can easily convey. Instructors, or “helpers,” in the PLAAY program consistently emphasize kinesthetic awareness, including physical contact with students as a statement of support and presence. Sometimes instructors set up physical confrontations, such as intentional fouls in basketballs, to challenge students to respond appropriately.

Dr. Stevenson elaborated on the practice of confronting students “in the moment” to teach a constructive response to anger. The problem with many aggression interventions, Dr. Stevenson said, is that they focus on the aggression as the problem, not what caused it. By doing things in the moment, you learn a particular student’s triggers, what gets a rise, and how to target him as an individual *before* he goes off. Most kids don’t *want* to fight, but once emotion kicks in they feel obligated. If an instructor sees a student begin to stutter, move – whatever other “warning signals” he commonly displays – they can intervene to push him out of that framework, and also provide an excuse for a student who doesn’t want to look like he’s backing down.

By learning the triggers of individual students instructors prevent aggressive incidents, but also demonstrate to students that they know them well, and care enough about them to learn their specific behavior patterns. Over time, Dr. Stevenson said, students become aware of their “triggers” along with adults, and are better able to de-escalate from a threatening situation. While Black Boys may be “hypervulnerable in a hypermasculine world,” personal and cultural empowerment can mediate their response to stress and increase their tolerance of frustration.

Dr. Stevenson finished his lecture by answering a few audience questions.

- It is possible, he said, to conduct the same work with girls or with mixed-gender groups, but one should be aware of when to separate the genders to discuss certain issues or isolate certain behavioral responses.
- There are instructors of different races who participate in the PLAAY program; the most important instructor quality is to truly care about students, as students easily differentiate between those who care, those who don’t, and those who are afraid.
- Different families / students need to be approached in different ways when talking about systemic racism. Relating personal experience to systems is crucial, as is talking about relational as opposed to absolute power. It can be difficult to talk to young children about systemic racism; but it’s easier to teach even very young kids an awareness of when they’ve been dissed, and how they feel when they’ve been dissed.

***Submitted 5/9/08: Project for School Innovation***