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Social Learning Theory and the Influence of Male Role Models on African American Children in PROJECT 2000

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Keywords

qualitative research

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Social Learning Theory and the Influence of Male Role Models on African American Children in PROJECT 2000

by
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Abstract

This study is an assessment of observational learning commonly known as social learning theory of a group of 55 African American students who are participants in a mentoring program known as PROJECT 2000. From first through sixth grades male role models, who were largely African American, were in the classroom as teacher assistants. At the time of the study all student participants were in fifth grade. An interview was conducted featuring a short open-ended questionnaire. Students in PROJECT 2000 had an opportunity to express their feelings about the male role models that worked with them in their classroom. These interviews assisted the researcher towards understanding, how the bonding relationship between the children and the male role models in the classroom, may impact social learning.

Introduction

When I first became involved with PROJECT 2000, I was a doctoral student in the School of Social Work at Howard University. This was during the early 90's when gang violence was at an all time high, and young Black males appeared to be in a state of crisis. As a graduate of Howard's M.S.W. program and then a doctoral student, my educational curricula had immersed my psyche into a Black experience that I had never been exposed to before. I learned about the dynamics of empowerment, strength perspective, and Afrocentricity. I also learned about African and African American historical truths that I had never been exposed to in previous educational environments. As a social worker, I was learning how to take this knowledge and translate it into skills and interventions that could be used to help empower African Americans and other oppressed populations. Needless to say, I was feeling very powerful with this new knowledge.

For the first time, I was beginning to understand why I was feeling so trapped, all my life I had been taught to see the world from a Eurocentric perspective. I wanted to use this new knowledge to do something to help empower African American men, so I had decided to do my dissertation on something positive related to African American men. This is perhaps why I was so disturbed when I saw Dr. Spencer Holland on national TV talking about PROJECT 2000. I don't remember his exact words, but he was talking about what sounded like a wonderful program for Black boys. The purpose of PROJECT 2000 was to bring men into the classroom to teach and mentor Black boys. When asked, "What could women do?" Dr. Holland responded, "Nothing," and I, as well as many other African American women was outraged. When I learned at the end of the program that Dr. Holland was on faculty at Morgan State University, I decided to go meet with him and challenge his comments about the role of women in helping Black boys. After an hour

or two of talking with Dr. Holland, I began to understand why he believed inner city Black boys needed male role models, and that it was nothing that women could do, because there was not a lack of women in their daily lives, but rather a lack of positive male role models. To make a long story short, Dr. Holland offered to be on my dissertation committee if I did something related to PROJECT 2000. I was curious about the contributions and roles of both men and women in the educational experience of Black children, so I accepted his offer, and began a three-year process of evaluating the program. Following is an excerpt from an article written by Holland (1996) that provides his insight on the program:

As its primary focus, PROJECT 2000 addresses what several researchers and theorists have held as the source of one of the early primary conflicts between nonschool and school cultures for African American males. That conflict, they note, arises from the female authority structure that exists in most elementary schools, particularly during the primary grade years when the teachers are almost exclusively women. Young Black inner-city boys, coming from predominantly female-headed households with few, if any, adult male role models who value academic achievement, may view the school as standing in stark contrast to the world of men as they know it (Holland, 1991). Coupled with the heavy emphasis on performance-based instructional strategies that require children to copy and imitate behaviors demonstrated by their teachers, the presence of a predominantly female teacher corps in the primary-grade classroom may lead young inner-city Black boys to believe that school work and activities are "what girls do." Indeed, as Holland notes, the songs and games that are integral to the instructional strategies of the primary grades are often rejected by young Black boys as "too feminine." Most of these boys rarely see men in their communities engaging in these types of activities, and they encounter few, if any, male teachers in the primary grades. Thus, their desire to participate in learning activities like singing the "A-B-C" song is often subordinated to their need to appear masculine. (p. 316)

Holland goes on to discuss his view further stating that:

PROJECT 2000 arose out of my belief that young Black boys in particular, need and benefit from more extensive opportunities to see and work with adult males in the school setting, especially during the primary-grade years. Thus, the primary objective of the program is to provide positive adult male role models, particularly African American men, in the daily school life of African American boys. Its secondary mission is to assist the mostly female teachers of these students in teaching them the academic and social skills they will need to compete successfully in the 21st century. (p. 217)

Foundational PROJECT 2000 Goals

Holland (1996) states

At the elementary school level, PROJECT 2000's goals are realized by an approach that emphasizes five principles, which are stressed by project volunteers in their interactions with the students over a five year period. The first of these, introduced during the first grade, emphasizes the importance of Listening. In second grade, the focus is on developing Self-Control. In third

grade, students are encouraged to assume Responsibility; and in fourth and fifth grades, the emphasis is on Commitment and Work, respectively." (p. 317)

These principles were used by the volunteers and teachers to keep the students focused on their job of paying attention to the teacher and completing their schoolwork. Again, male volunteers, assist the teacher in several ways: (1) working one-on one with boys who may be experiencing difficulty learning something the teacher is working on; (2) dealing with boys who are demonstrating discipline problems; (3) modeling behavior by singing songs, demonstrating the movements that often go along with songs, reading stories, teaching lessons etc., and finally (4) emphasizing the principles through discussions, personal stories and explanations about the definitions and importance of each principle.

This program has received national attention as the first of its kind to be implemented in the nation. Articles have appeared in a variety of print media, both lay and professional (e.g., Gibbs, [1991](#)), and the CBS Television program *60 Minutes* aired a segment on PROJECT 2000 in the early 1990s (Radcliffe, [1990](#)). More recently, *ABC's Nightline* aired a segment on the recent success of the program and its students (Waters, [1999](#)). PROJECT 2000 has served as a model for public schools across the country including Baltimore Maryland and Newark and New Brunswick New Jersey.

Description of PROJECT 2000

PROJECT 2000 Incorporated is a private non-profit organization established in 1994 to provide educational mentoring and academic support services to inner-city African-American youth, particularly African-American males, from the first through twelfth grades. The program was first implemented when the class of the year 2000 entered first grade, the fall of 1988. During the Elementary School Phase (1988-1994), PROJECT 2000 was a volunteer program, sponsored by a local chapter of Concerned Black Men, Inc., which recruited and trained adult male volunteers, particularly African-American men, to serve as Teacher Assistants (TAs) in the classrooms of this group of children during the school day. The TAs' major responsibilities involved helping the children, particularly the boys, with reading, writing and mathematics achievement in the school setting working under the direction of classroom teachers. The program sponsored field trips and other educational/cultural enrichment activities on weekends, evenings, and during the summer.

More than 200 male volunteers participated in the program during the primary school years. Volunteers were recruited from all segments of the community and represented white and blue-collar occupations, college students and retirees. Ninety percent of these volunteers were African-American. All volunteers were trained as teacher assistants. TAs pledged to spend a minimum of a half-day session per visit: 8:30 a.m. to 12 noon or 12 noon to 3:00 p.m. Sessions of shorter duration were thought to be too disruptive to the school and would not meet the objective of quality interaction between volunteers and students.

Volunteers attended a half-day training workshop before being allowed to spend time in the classroom. The focus was on early childhood development, the demographics of the student

population, the role of the teacher assistant, and the types of tasks and activities TAs were expected to perform.

Process of the Program: Male Role Models in the Classroom

Teacher assistants were recruited from a wide variety of venues including colleges, churches, corporations, governmental agencies, as well as male fraternal and social organizations. In order to participate in this program, TAs had to volunteer work in the classrooms of the children by spending all morning or all afternoon, once a week, for the school year, helping the teachers of these children. They also had to participate in a 3-hour training and orientation session conducted at the school site on a Saturday morning. This session was to familiarize volunteers with the goals and objectives of the program, and to introduce them to the types of activities they would be expected to participate in with the children. This orientation also made the men aware that they would always be working under the direction of the teacher.

Upon completing orientation/training, volunteers reported to the school counselor on their first visit, after signing-in at the Main Office and receiving their nametags. The counselor, who also served as the school volunteer coordinator, then assigned the volunteer to a teacher participating in the program and took him to the classroom to be introduced. On subsequent visits the volunteers would sign-in at the Main Office, and then proceed to his assigned classroom teacher with whom he worked the whole school year. This consistency provided the opportunity for the volunteer to become a part of that classroom culture by becoming very well known to the children, teacher and sometimes the parents.

During the first visit the volunteers introduced themselves to the class through a "Getting to Know You" exercise created by the program. This structured activity gave the volunteer an opportunity to tell the children who he was, where he was born, and where he went to high school, what he did for a living or where he was going to college and what he was majoring in, and any other pertinent information they chose to share with the children during this 10 to 15 minute presentation.

The tasks and activities teacher assistants engaged in during their visits included the types of duties one would expect of a regular elementary school teacher's aide. The primary grade teachers developed the lists of duties as a guide for the men during their orientation. Since the program was designed to assist the teachers with the boys, helping the teachers with the discipline of the boys was a major goal. In addition, within the context of the teachers pedagogy the volunteers read stories to the children, checked homework, checked assigned seat work, took attendance, monitored lavatories, collected and passed out instructional materials, escorted children to special classes, monitored the play ground and lunchroom, helped plan field trips and served as chaperones, and participated in the singing of songs and other games which are integral to the pedagogy in primary grades. It was emphasized during training that one of the major roles volunteers would play revolved around getting the boys to copy the behavior of the teacher during activities like singing the A,B,C Song, playing Simon Says, singing songs, playing games and other pedagogies which require the children to actively participate in classroom instruction. These are the activities many inner-city primary grade boys fail to participate in at school, because of what appears to be a reluctance to copy the behavior of a female teacher.

Teacher assistant volunteers also worked one-on-one and with small groups of boys on specific academic tasks assigned by the teacher, while the teacher conducted lessons with the other children. At times the teacher would work with small groups of children while the volunteer monitored the work the teacher had assigned to the class.

Since teachers knew when the volunteers would be in their classrooms, they often would incorporate the services of the teacher assistant into their lesson plans for that day. It was important that during the orientation the men learned that there was nothing an elementary school child was learning that they could not teach, and it would make little difference what the exact nature of the lesson was when they arrived because they would know how to do it. If the teacher was in the middle of a lesson when the volunteer arrived, he would proceed to the "volunteer corner" where the teacher would have work for him to do (correcting papers, duplicating, running errands) until she finished and could get him involved with the children. Knowing that they were "Experts" in the concepts being taught to small children made the men more comfortable in their roles as assistant teachers.

In addition to providing the teachers with another pair of hands and eyes, the men appeared to indirectly effect overall climate of the building. The teachers were also aware that they were serving as role models for the volunteers, and their sometimes-negative behaviors towards the children were often modified by the presence of volunteers. The school principal even reported that absenteeism among the teachers was less frequent, and having men in the building on a consistent basis led to changes in the way teachers dressed and interacted with the children and each other.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Through an exploratory research approach information was gathered about PROJECT 2000 that provides a good foundation for other qualitative studies, as well as quantitative studies. This exploratory approach has allowed us to discover important information about the perceived impact that the Project has had on the participants.

The purpose of this study was to assess the influence male role models have on the social learning of a group of 55 African American students who are participants in a mentoring program known as PROJECT 2000. At the time of the study all student participants were in fifth grade.

Through a short open-ended questionnaire, students in PROJECT 2000 had an opportunity to express their feelings about the male role models that worked with them in the classroom. Students also answered questions about new skills, information, and new behaviors they acquired through their interactions with the male role models. Perceptions of the children's interactions with the male role models were evaluated to understand how the bonding relationship in the classroom might influence social learning.

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory was born in the 1930s at Yale University, when Clark Hull taught a seminar on relating learning theory to psychoanalysis (Miller, [1983](#)). Several young scholars who later became known as leading pioneers in social learning theory -- O. H. Mowrer, Neal Miller, John Dollard, Robert Sears, Leonard Doob, and John Whiting -- were graduate students in Hull's seminar (Miller, [1983](#)). The guiding belief of these social learning theorists was that personality is learned (Miller, [1983](#)). These pioneers of early social learning theory explored frustration, aggression, neuroses, identification, conscience formation, and defense mechanisms. In general social learning theorists adopted laboratory testable content from Freudian theory and sought explanations for behavior in principles of stimulus-response learning rather than hydraulic models.

In the 1940s and 1960s there were two major theoretical changes in social learning theory, both involving imitation (Dollard & Miller, [1941](#); Bandura & Walters, [1963](#)). Dollard and Miller ([1941](#)) set out to show that imitation was one of the most powerful socialization forces. During the process of operant conditioning, imitation is learned through the reinforcement of various imitative behaviors (Miller, [1983](#)).

Bandura and Walters ([1963](#)) carried imitation one step further by demonstrating how new behaviors can be acquired by simply watching a model. Observers are affected by the same punishment or reinforcement received by the model for their behavior. According to Bandura and Walter's ([1963](#)) theory of vicarious reinforcement, a child who sees a hard-working classmate praised by the teacher learns to try that behavior. They believed that without overt behavior, social learning theory based on a stimulus response orientation could not account for learning. In the 1970s Bandura's ([1977](#)) theory took on more of a cognitive form than his earlier work. Bandura ([1977](#)) became less concerned with the literal duplication of behavior (imitation) than with observational learning as a more general process of acquiring information from another person, verbally or visually.

It has become virtually impossible to come up with a general learning theory orientation, because learning theory is many theories, including some approaches that are clearly not theories at all. Modern social learning theorists have maintained a focus on learning, but expanded learning in two primary ways (Miller, [1983](#)). First, they emphasized social behavior and the social context of behavior. They argued that learning theories based on animal research are inadequate to account for human behavior, which occurs, in a social milieu. Much of the socialization of children involves the shaping of behaviors directed toward people in their outer world. Thus, social learning theorists have expanded the context of learning theory by suggesting that social behaviors can be explained by principles of learning. Second, social learning theorists expanded the types of learning that may be explained. They saw the importance of observational learning: acquiring new skills, information, or altering old behaviors simply by watching other children and adults (Brewer & Wann, [1998](#); Couzijn, [1999](#); Honer, [1998](#); Shebilske, [1998](#)).

In fact, Bandura ([1977](#)) believed that much of learning comes from observational learning and instruction rather than from overt, trial-and-error behavior. Imitation of a model's behavior when the model is no longer present is a powerful learning skill. It is important to note that the behavior acquired can be an interpersonal behavior, a perceptual-motor skill, or a conceptual rule. The critical features of imitation are that the child need not produce the behavior right away

and the model need not be reinforced in order for the observer to learn. Observational learning, or as it has been described here as imitation, is particularly important for explaining how novel, complex behaviors are acquired during development.

Research Methodology

As a graduate student I was given an opportunity to create my own research design for this exploratory evaluation. Dr. Holland's role was primarily to provide access to the students and provide background information on PROJECT 2000.

I used the qualitative research paradigm to study the students in their natural environment. As a "complete participant" observer (McCall & Simmons, [1969](#)), I conducted field research through interviews and observations of students in selected classroom settings.

Study Participants

PROJECT 2000 is located in an impoverished community that is 99% African American. The elementary school where PROJECT 2000 was initiated was selected because of its location and the school staff were eager to have male role models in the classroom. All the students in this study were African-American and came from lower socio-economic households. Ninety-nine percent of the children in the school qualify for the reduced or free lunch program. The school had fifth grade classrooms where the children ranged in age from ten to twelve.

Data Collection

Description of Research Team

I was the primary researcher for this evaluation and it served as the basis for my dissertation. My role was to create the research design and collect the necessary information. I was guided by exploratory research techniques. My objective was to understand the process of PROJECT 2000 and the perceived impact of the participants.

Dr. Holland's role in this evaluation was limited yet critical. He gave the permission for me to evaluate PROJECT 2000 and secured meetings for me with key school personnel who ultimately gave me permission to go into the school and interview the participants in PROJECT 2000. These key personnel included the director of research for the school system, the school principal, and the classroom teachers. Dr. Holland also secured a small research grant for me from Concerned Black Men, Inc.

Triangulation

Data was collected using three primary techniques: 1) classroom observations; 2) interviews; and 3) contact in the school with administrators, teachers, etc. On my first visit to the school, Dr. Holland introduced me to the school principal. The procedure for entering the school was to sign in at the main office. I would follow this procedure each time I visited. We then had an extensive meeting with the school counselor. She knew all of the children in the school and she was very

supportive of PROJECT 2000. I was impressed by her knowledge of individual children and their academic and family situations.

From an environmental perspective, I was a little surprised about the physical condition of the school. I remember that it looked clean, but it didn't smell very clean and there were some leaks and peeling paint. The thing that struck me the most was that the hallways didn't seem bright. There were no colorful pictures or posters; in fact, in most instances the walls were completely bare. This seemed odd for an elementary school.

Sometime later, when I was closer to actually doing my evaluation, someone took me around to meet the three fifth grade teachers. PROJECT 2000 began when the class of 2000 was in first grade, and at the time I met them, they were in fourth grade. I remember one teacher being especially nice and enthusiastic and one who appeared a little unpleasant and a lot less enthusiastic, and the other seemed neutral.

Over the course of several months I went in and out of the school a couple dozen times collecting data. From the student records I collected grades, test scores, and demographic information. I also went into each classroom and administered two Locus of Control Scales. What I couldn't find in the school files, the school counselor filled in the gaps, and what she didn't know she found out for me through other sources.

Once data was collected from the files, I began conducting individual interviews with the students. I met briefly with each classroom teacher to explain what I would be doing and the days I would be at the school. I had a list of all the students in each classroom and I started with one classroom and interviewed students until all of the students had been interviewed. When I was ready for a child, I would knock on the door and announce which child was next. The kids smiled a little when their names were called. After all, it was a chance to get out of the class for a little while. What I noticed with the kids that I'm beginning to notice about a lot of kids I see everywhere I go, is that kids don't seem to be happy anymore. You don't see the laughter and the smiles; it's hard to know if they are happy. The interviews themselves took about 15 minutes. Some interviews were held in a classroom that was sometimes used for tutoring or other one-on-one sessions with specific children. When that room was occupied, I just set up two desks at the end of a hallway and interviewed children there.

When I went to get a child for an interview or walk a child back to his/her classroom after an interview, was when I had brief opportunities to see the mentors in action. I saw them singing, I heard them telling stories, I saw them leaning over helping an individual child, and I heard them raise their voices to address a child whose behavior had gotten a little out of control. When the men were there, the teachers seemed more relaxed. They appeared able to do more things and the children were more excited. When the men weren't there, the teachers raised voices to get children under control; it sounded more like yelling than when the TA's did it. In my observations having the TA's present created a more pleasant learning environment for everyone.

I took great care to write down every observation and discussion as it occurred, regardless of how trivial it may have appeared at the time. I took detailed notes during interviews and maintained a research log that documented all observations throughout the study. I found that

maintaining the research log provided a structured process for organizing my observations and thoughts. As I collected literature, notes from studies were also added to the log so that all data from the research were maintained in a central repository. Overall, the process of maintaining the research log resulted in a rewarding research experience and a rich collection of data for the analysis. I believe that for the qualitative researchers this is a most value tool for participant observations.

Fifty-five students were interviewed. Each participant was asked the following questions:

1. Do you like PROJECT 2000?;
2. Do you like most of the men who come to your classroom?;
3. Do these men make you feel good about yourself?; and
4. What are some of the things these men have taught you?

For questions one, two, and three, depending on the response, the participant was then asked an additional question. For example; why do you like PROJECT 2000, why don't you like most of the men, why do they make you feel good about yourself sometimes, etc.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire and research log were analyzed to identify patterns and themes and the results were related to existing theories on social learning. Content analysis and descriptive coding was used to analyze and identify patterns in the responses (Miles & Huberman, [1994](#)). A content analysis is performed on each student's questionnaire to observe patterns in the responses. Berelson's ([1952](#)) definition states "content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication." (p. 18). Weber ([1990](#)) defines it as "a systematic research method for analyzing textual information in a standardized way that allows evaluators to make inferences about that information," (p. 9).

I coded data from the questionnaire and research log to analyze the meanings of the observations and to assist in identifying patterns that may relate to the theory. In the first level coding, I used descriptive codes to attribute a class of phenomena to portions of the research log text (Miles & Huberman, [1994](#)). The findings were categorized along the three primary questions addressed by this study: (1) satisfaction with PROJECT 2000 and the men/volunteers in the program, (2) how the program makes participants feel about themselves, and (3) learning experiences gained through the program. Next, pattern coding was used to group the first level codes into relevant themes that could relate to the theory. The pattern codes identified the relationship between the facts of this study and the theory presented earlier in this paper. The results of the data analysis are presented in the following section.

Discussion of Findings

Satisfaction with PROJECT 2000.

The questionnaire posed the question: Do you like PROJECT 2000? The results revealed that 81% of the students responded yes, 1.8 % responded no and 16.3% responded sometimes. Key

words were identified from each of the responses given for why a participant liked PROJECT 2000, did not like it, or liked it sometimes. These key words were then broken down into four primary category (1) things PROJECT 2000 provided, (2) activities, (3) things the men do, and (4) things the men teach.

Respondents seemed to like the resources PROJECT 2000 provided such as: food; money; school tools: and certificates. Some of the activities that were identified included: field trips; workshops and programs; parties and luncheons; speakers; and cultural activities, such as ujima. Ujima is a Swahili word meaning "collective work and responsibility." It is one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa, an African American cultural holiday. Each year PROJECT 2000 sponsors a Ujima program. Other respondents identified things the men did or things they taught. While some students said they didn't like PROJECT 2000 because the men were mean; hollered at you; or ignored you when you needed help, the majority of the respondents felt the men supported their academic and extra curricular activities; were there for them; and taught them about values like responsibility and respect. [Table 1](#) provides examples of actual student responses from the interviews.

Table 1	
Question: Do you like Project 2000?	General Findings Key responses were broken into four primary categories. Significant responses are presented below.
Example Student Responses	
Things Project 2000 provides	Food, gifts/toys, school store, certificates, scholarships, school tools, money
Activities	Trips, ujima, parties, luncheons, speakers, workshops, programs
Things the men do	"Help you", "talk to us", "help for college", "they're nice", "care for me", "want me to get an education", "they're fun", "they play", "treat you like a son", "always there for you", "treat us good", "need a friend", they are there", "come on time", "come to basketball games"
Things the men teach	"be all you can be", "about respect", "help with school work", "be a great student", "responsibility", "words for each year", "can't always give, you have to earn"

Satisfaction with the Program

Each student was asked: Do you like most of the men who come to your classroom? Seventy percent responded yes, 7.2% responded no, and 21.8% responded sometimes. Key words were identified from each of the responses given for why a participant liked most of the men who came to their classroom, did not like them, or liked them sometimes. With only two exceptions, the key words provided by PROJECT 2000 students fell into one category, things the men do. Overall, the responses appear to be equal looking at the quantitative results. However, a closer look at the responses revealed a different perspective. While respondents identified ways the volunteers had helped them with an assignment in math, reading or language, an emphasis was also placed on discussions about liking the men because they stopped fights, didn't scream at them, and never turned their back on them.

Overall, PROJECT 2000 students were enthusiastic about their responses to this question. They smiled and told stories about specific incidents they remembered. PROJECT 2000 students often identified specific men that they liked a lot or that had helped them. PROJECT 2000 students were able to demonstrate a connection with the men who worked in their classrooms. They were people they saw on a regular schedule, the men had names; they interacted with them beyond teaching them how to read and figure out math problems. They taught them valuable lessons through their stories and their commitment to the program. [Table 2](#) provides examples of actual responses from the students interviewed.

Table 2	
Question: Do you like the men who come to your classroom?	General Findings Overall, students were very enthusiastic about their responses to the question. Students often identified specific men they liked or who helped them. Key responses were identified and fell into one category.
Example Student Responses	
Things the men do	"talk to us", "they're nice", "they're fun", "help us", "help us with work", "help us with problems", "stop fights", "take away things from bad people", "care for me", "funny", "don't scream at you", "never turn their backs on you", "always come when you need them", "never give you a hard time", "great people", "friendly", "teach things I don't know", "help with reading", "help with mathematics", "help with spelling", "help with language"

How The Program Makes Participants Feel About Themselves

The students were asked: Do these men/volunteers make you feel good about yourself? Of the students, 80% responded yes, 5.5% responded no, and 14.5% responded sometimes. Key words were identified for each of the responses given for why the men/volunteer made them feel good about themselves, did not make them feel good, or made them feel good sometimes.

Several respondents actually talked about how the men had changed them. For example, instead of just being able to say that the men told them not to lie, or that the men didn't lie to them, one respondent said that they make you not want to lie. Other examples included responses like: they make you think positive when you're thinking negative; they make you want to do your work; and calm me down when I'm mad.

PROJECT 2000 students were able to articulate with feeling how the men made them feel about themselves. For example, one boy said that one of the men was like another father that he could count on him for anything. Another boy said that the founder of PROJECT 2000 was a genius. [Table 3](#) provides examples of actual student responses to this question.

Table 3	
Question: Do the men make you feel good about yourself?	General Findings Students were able to articulate how the men made them feel about themselves. Most identified them as father figures they could count on for anything.
Example Student Responses	
Feeling	"like another father", "there when you need them", "break up fights", "take care of you", "nice", "make you feel human", "make you feel special", "fun to work with", "say they love us", "make you think positive when you're thinking negative", "they don't lie to you", "make you want to do your work", "make you not want to lie", "make me feel happy when I'm sad", "when I say I can't do it, they say I can", "say the better I do know, the better I'll do in college", "tell us to do right, not wrong", "Say to stay out of trouble", "think I'm the brightest person in the class", "give me good advice", "teach us not to talk to strangers", " Say I can be somebody", "Say that all people make mistakes", "make me laugh", calm me down when I'm mad, "Tell me I'm a very special person"

Learning Experiences Gained Through Program

The students were asked: What are some of the things these men/volunteers have taught you? Key words were identified from each of the responses given. PROJECT 2000 students identified school subjects, but more often talked about how the men had taught them about: safety; self-respect; discipline; control; responsibility; manners; stay in school; don't do drugs; how to listen; loyalty and honesty; not to play with guns; and say no to guns and violence.

This was perhaps the most significant section on the questionnaire. PROJECT 2000 students more often acknowledged that the men had taught them values and important life skills. This I believe begins to validate some of the principles of social learning theory. [Table 4](#) provides examples of actual student responses to this question.

Students often acknowledged that the men taught them values and important life skills in addition to academic subjects.

Table 4	
Question: What are some of the things these men have taught you?	General Findings Students often acknowledged that the men taught them values and important life skills in addition to academic subjects.
Example Student Responses	
Key words from the responses	stay off the streets", "say no to drugs", "ask about commitments", "be nice", "be on best behavior", "where they work", "what they do", "listen when teacher is talking", "show respect", "read out loud", "no fighting over stupid", "how to do work", "learn definitions", "mathematics", "reading", "language", "safety", "self respect", "responsibility", "never punch girls", "be loyal and honest", " respect adults and others", "science", "social studies", "writing, "self discipline", " self control,"stay away from strangers", "sex", "introduce self in proper way", "manners", "scholarships", "what I should and shouldn't do", "stay in school", "be polite to others"

Limitations

While a study of this nature is rich in information, which helps us begin to understand important dynamics we have limited knowledge of, it also has limitations. We are unable to say that there

was a cause and effect relationship between participation in PROJECT 2000 and measures on any indicators. Competing factors were not controlled for, such as children's relationships with their teachers, families, and the Hawthorne effect, and thus cannot be ruled out as possible influences on the children's responses.

While the primary researcher was only known by the participants as someone who was collecting information for PROJECT 2000, that relationship alone could have prevented some children from expressing negative feelings about the Project. Because of a narrow focus on the children's perceptions, data was not collected on the perceptions of some other key stakeholders, such as, the role models, teachers, and parents.

Future Research

Some quantitative research has been performed to evaluate the academic performance of PROJECT 200 participants. Much more research is needed to determine if a relationship exists between the program and student achievement. Data on grade point averages (GPA) and standardized test scores were collected on study participants for second, third and fourth grade. Analysis shows that PROJECT 2000 students were more likely to earn average and above average grades than their counter parts from the comparison group (Wells-Wilbon, [1994](#)). As males in PROJECT 2000 got older, they were more likely to have higher grade point averages than their male counterparts in the comparison group. There were no differences between females in PROJECT and females from the comparison group (Wells-Wilbon, [1994](#)).

Data on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills was analyzed for math and reading. Males in PROJECT 2000 were more likely to score at and above grade level than male counter parts in comparison group. There were no cases where males from the comparison group scored higher than males in PROJECT 2000. When compared to the national norm, children in PROJECT 2000 were at or above the national norm for spelling and mathematics for all three grade levels (Wells-Wilbon, [1994](#)).

Additionally, locus of control instruments were administered to participants in fifth grade and again in ninth. All of this data will be important for conducting future research. The researchers realize that while this data was collected it may be difficult to prove any cause and effect relationship between participation in PROJECT 2000 and any of these measures.

Comparative studies between students who dropped out of PROJECT 2000 over the years and those who stay in the PROJECT until graduation from high school would be important. As PROJECT 2000 has grown and expanded its services to include community outreach and services to families and the mothers of PROJECT 2000 participants, there will be additional opportunities for future research.

Implications

Social learning theorists believe that personality is learned and that new behaviors can be acquired by simply watching a model. As social learning theory has evolved, there has been less emphasis on literal duplication or imitation of behavior and more attention placed on

observational learning as a more general process of acquiring information from another person. This is the significance of PROJECT 2000.

The role of the men in the classroom and the learning, which took place among the participants in PROJECT 2000, can be categorized into three areas. First, the men assisted children who experienced difficulty with concepts the teacher introduced. Second, the men assisted the teacher by managing discipline problems. Third, the men taught and reinforced positive values.

Responsible adults know that for children to grow into productive members of our society, children need to be able to read, write and acquire basic knowledge and skills, which are taught in school. This cannot happen if children don't feel good about themselves and lack basic values, which govern how they act and treat other people. Further, this cannot happen if children do not have appropriate models that teach and demonstrate acceptable behavior.

While the men in PROJECT 2000 did assist with teaching basic skills by working one-on-one with children who needed additional help, and while their role as managers of discipline problems surely allowed the teacher to spend her time teaching, this was not their greatest contribution. I believe their greatest contribution was in the stories they told, the smiles they displayed, and the lessons they taught about respect and responsibility.

In an interview one of the children stated, "They make you want to do your work". This I believe is a very powerful statement. Not only did the children imitate the model, but also they internalized what the model was teaching. In the absence of the model not only were they able to do what the model did, but also they were able to take the positive values taught, adopt them as their own, and actually perform better inside and outside the classroom. You can teach a child how to read, write, and compute math problems, but if you empower them to feel good about themselves and teach them important life values, they will want to read, write and compute. In this context, learning is not viewed just as a tool to get a grade or pass a standardized test. When children are empowered through learning, they will read even when they are not instructed, they will write about things only they can imagine, and they will use math to manage their lives!

Conclusions and Reflections

In my experience working with Dr. Holland and PROJECT 2000, Inc., I am clear that the program honors and celebrates the contributions and influences good teachers and supportive families have in the lives of any child. The goals and objectives of helping inner-city boys embrace academic success can only be accomplished by lending a helping hand to mothers and teachers. In the face of tremendous odds, PROJECT 2000 has kept true to its goals and objectives.

The role and contribution of males in the classroom cannot be ignored. At minimum, they make the classrooms more manageable so teachers can teach. At their highest level, they instill positive values, pride, and the desire to want to do the right thing even in absence of the role model. While school is considered the place where children learn the skills to be productive participants in the workforce, reading, writing and math alone are not sufficient for preparing the next generation. Mentoring programs and other volunteer programs that bring men into the classroom,

and that are well structured for consistency and modeling positive behavior can be a valuable resource for intervening with African American public school children.

In this study, there seems to be a relationship between structuring a program that focuses on values and important life skills as well as tutoring and academic support. Children like adults learn and function best when they have a strong foundation of values and feel valued as important people. Modeling and teaching important life skills is the foundation for building academic achievers. Further research looking at the relationship between male role models in the classroom and its impact on academic achievement for African American children is needed.

This research experience was rewarding for me and exposed some findings that I believe contribute to the literature on social learning theory. Use of participant observation allowed an insight that may not have been captured in any other form. Perspectives from other researchers in similar settings are needed to expand our understanding of social learning and opportunities exist for use of the qualitative paradigm to explore many other questions on the research.

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