

Voyages Learning History

Organizations like ours try to learn from our experiences, both the successful and not so successful ones. This is a way of assessing our effectiveness and sharing information. It is an important process for the growth of any organization. In doing so, we have recorded some of our learning process around the concept of a “learning history.”

We went back to the source the Voyages initiative – the people who created it, those who developed the concepts and formed the process for driving it, those who helped to implement and manage it, and those who participated. We tried to capture and convey the experience and insights of these people. The result of this new form of assessment, a Learning History, is put forth on the pages that follow. We believe that what we have learned will help you to develop and implement a Voyages program for your community or organization.

We hope that this learning history will help and encourage you on this journey. Every community must take their own path, but the paths of others might help determine the right “voyage” for you.

Memorial Health System staff members are more than happy to answer any questions you may have regarding this process. Please feel free to call us at (219)284-7115.

Phil Newbold

CEO, Memorial Hospital/Health System

Understanding Where We've Been

Ray Turner, a social worker at Harrison Elementary school in South Bend, developed and proposed the Voyages 1998 program. Acutely aware of a local need to address the issues faced by black boys, aged 9-13, Ray and others designed the Voyages program specifically for this group. Ray is well versed in the day-to-day challenges these boys come in contact with, and the

sometimes sparse resources and support available to help them process the struggles of their lives.

Ray tells the story of “Ryan,” a 10-year old boy who represents many of the issues a typical Voyages participant brings to the program. Ryan has witnessed the aftermath of seven acts of violence, the closest to him being the shooting of a cousin in connection with a drug deal. He lives with his mother, grandmother, and two younger siblings, who have a different father. His mother has a history of drug use, and has spent a year in jail for writing bad checks. For these reasons and others, the overwhelmed grandmother retains legal guardian status of Ryan. A fan of drawing -- mainly superheroes -- and basketball, Ryan is intelligent and articulate, but nonetheless is having serious difficulty in school. He has been detained after school twice, and was suspended for five days for bringing a weapon to school.

Ray’s story goes on, as does the life of Ryan. It’s not hard to imagine any number of negative outcomes for Ryan and his community, as he grows older, if something doesn’t change soon. Voyages 1998 is all about that change. Founded with an understanding of the systemic historical, social, and cultural challenges that pervade the developing years of young black boys, Voyages uses its perspective to build a specific and thoughtful program for this energetic and hungry audience.

During recent years, a considerable amount of attention has been drawn to issues relating to black men and boys. High rates of special education placement, delinquency and incarceration reveal serious problems for all of our communities. Research regarding black boys and how to best meet their needs provided a theoretical basis for the Voyages program. A phenomenon called “fourth grade failure syndrome” has particular relevance. The syndrome is a withdrawal of interest by children of this age in school-related activities, with resultant academic failure (Kunjufu 1983).

Contributors to “fourth grade failure syndrome” (Kunjufu 1983):

- single-parent families, with overwhelmed mothers and a lack of male role models;
- teachers who are unfamiliar with black language, values and behavior;
- a predominance of female teachers, who see typically “male” behavior (e.g., louder, more physical, less cooperative, shorter attention span) as inappropriate, and;

- teachers who cannot communicate high expectations to their students

The result is a school environment which does not understand the black boy, and cannot tailor its presentation of academic material to meet his needs. Feeling marginal to the educational process and falling behind academically, the boy looks to sources outside of school for confirmation and may be lost to educational intervention after that point. This withdrawal from academic pursuits can clearly separate self-worth from academic achievement for the boy, two things more closely linked in the majority of successful students. With the correlation between academic and global self-esteem severed, the likelihood of academic failure increases. Black boys are at higher risk of continued separation from academic success as an integral part of self-esteem (Osborne 1997).

These factors and additional research played a critical role in how the Voyages program developed:

- black boys are at particular risk at about 4th grade;
- an Afrocentric curriculum can improve the self-esteem of younger black boys;
- increasing identification with academic achievement can improve future academic performance;
- involving positive black male role models may help meet the needs of boys in single-female households, and;
- setting high, but attainable expectations increases sense of capabilities and the bond between teacher/adult and student/child.

With this background in mind, Voyages 1998 was made possible through the collaborative efforts of Memorial Hospital and South Bend Community School Corporation, and championed by Ray, who became the Program Coordinator. Through the Title I program, the South Bend Community School Corporation provided financial support for staff salaries, student mentors, supplies and evaluation. Through the Summer Feeding Program, the Corporation made breakfast and lunch available for program participants, and provided transportation for field trips. Memorial Hospital contributed additional funding for salaries, as well as consultant

services (psychiatric and psychological), t-shirts, the writing of the program evaluation narrative and an awards luncheon to celebrate the completion of the program.

Mapping It Out

Ryan's life -- the lives of all boys who are a part of his story, really -- are lives ready for intervention. The Voyages program attempts to begin it, considering three dimensions of intervention that helped formed the program's foundation:

- *Intervention must offer an alternative.* It's vital to offer a child a healthy view of the world and the options available to him that are significantly different from those currently being offered in his environment. In the case of inner city boys, this might involve exposing them to experiences that widen their perspective and challenge the limitations they have accepted for themselves. Seeing black men in professional roles contradicts the stereotype that they are limited to athletics and entertainment. Visiting college campuses, cultural institutions and community facilities helps them to believe that they can join the mainstream of American society. The possibility of options allows the boys to see that they can make choices regarding their future.
- *Intervention must be relevant to experience.* A boy's world must be acknowledged and understood. He is valued for the worth that he already has, and not only the worth he could attain. Opportunities that are presented are attainable and the path to them is clearly defined. Mentors, besides being examples of alternatives, can also play a part in bridging the gap between present reality and future possibilities by making the connection more relevant through their involvement with participants. Talking with people who came from a similar environment and "made it" can offer proof that it can be done.
- *Intervention must empower.* Empowerment motivates boys to make better decisions and take action. It gives them the tools for making positive choices, and a sense of confidence that he can negotiate unfamiliar territory. One aspect of this is demystifying the process of self-improvement, breaking it down into concrete planning steps and skills. Goal setting, conflict-resolution and learning self-awareness are critical in changing a boy from a victim of circumstances to an agent of change in his own life.

The Journey

The children in Voyages were some of the “worst” at Harrison Elementary, a South Bend inner-city school. They were twenty African American boys between 9 and 13, and with few exceptions all had a history of behavioral and academic difficulties. Several had had multiple disciplinary actions against them in the prior year. Several were receiving special education services, as children with learning disabilities or emotional handicaps. Many lived with their grandmothers, as circumstances made their parents unable to care for them. One was being raised by his great-grandmother, as both mother and grandmother were drug involved and incarcerated, or soon to be. The mother of another had been murdered. Most were known by the school social workers and counselors as extremely “high risk.” Many of their teachers preferred to have them out of the classroom rather than have to manage their disruptive influence. In short, these were the students that nobody knew what to do with.

There was a lot of ground to cover in the short time the program ran, half-days for a full month. The first curricular component underscored exposure to African-American history, from pre-colonial Africa to present day. Participants were engaged in activities that allowed them to see the many contributions, sacrifices and accomplishments made by people who looked like themselves. The underlying goal was to enlarge the boys’ extended self-concept to include images that inculcate pride and positive identification. Similar to this goal was direct exposure to African culture, another program component. Discussion of traditional values, relationships and customs allowed participants to view their cultural origins in a more positive light, and went a long way toward dispelling the misconception that Africans are a race of savages. Several field trips put concrete examples to these ideas through museum exhibits at The African American History Museum in Detroit, The DuSable Museum in Chicago, and local sites as well.

Ray credits his favorite part of the program to the “discovery learning” he can see taking a place in a child during this part of the program. “Seeing the knowledge, seeing kids realize for the first time themselves what the history has been in this country, what positive contributions they’ve made...When a child realizes something for the first time and they get it”...this is when learning comes truly and easily. “Once it’s internalized,” Ray said, “you don’t have to worry about beating it in.”

Clinical intervention was also a focus as the program progressed. Issues of anger management and social skills were addressed in group settings as well as informal individual

discussions. Many of the participants live in home and community systems which encourage negative social behavior. The goal of this aspect, then, was to teach effective and appropriate coping strategies, hopefully redirecting troublesome behavior patterns into more productive channels.

The last major component of the program was the encouragement of self-awareness. Participants spent time every day writing their thoughts, impressions and feelings in journals. They were also encouraged to share these reflections with the group, with mutual respect being modeled and affirmed.

The Voyages 1998 staff was Ray Turner, Program Coordinator, who, besides developing the program, continued to implement it by arranging the collaborative financing, developing the budget, selecting participants and performing the daily administrative functions of the program, in addition to leading clinical groups and providing individual assistance. A clinical social worker had direct contact with the participants throughout all their program routine, facilitating all activities, co-leading clinical groups, and providing interventions as needed. A clinical psychologist and a psychiatrist both provided consultation as needed and other assistance. Two high school mentors kept the group organized into cadres for the purpose of record-keeping and other activities, and an instructor in African culture, a doctoral student at the University of Notre Dame from West Africa contributed to teaching program components.

Bringing It Home

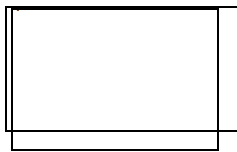
A formal evaluation of the Voyages program was conducted by Dr. Thomas Merluzzi of the University of Notre Dame. It attempted to document the changes that occurred for the boys involved as a function of the program. According to results, there were no significant differences, although Dr. Merluzzi named several reasons why that might be the case, some related to program characteristics (such as the short length of time the program ran, and the lack of resources to follow up on participants after the summer) and others related to the evaluation itself (the questionnaires may have been beyond the reading level of some participants, the evaluation tools may not have monitored the real changes that actually occurred).

Certainly, there is strong anecdotal support for the success of the program. A more qualitative questionnaire revealed that the boys valued the program, and especially enjoyed the field trips and museums. They liked learning about African American history, and seemed to be deeply impressed by the suffering and accomplishments of other African Americans. "For a

few boys, the connection between their culture and their own behavior emerged,” said Dr. Merluzzi, “Several boys indicated in the questionnaires that based on their exposure to African American history they had some behaviors to work on, such as ‘not fighting,’ controlling my temper,’ ‘act better in class,’ etc..”

A forty minute focus group with twelve Voyages program participants offered deep impressions that they carried as a result of the experience. One notable example was the fact that fights among the participants, which were frequent prior to the summer, were now almost non-existent, as they had developed a sense of camaraderie. Several of them had adopted strategies which helped them to avoid fighting, such as visiting Mr. Turner’s office as a way of preventing escalation. Other changes noted by the boys themselves, or school personnel included a greater propensity for the participants to apply themselves to schoolwork, improved social skills, and expanded horizons that show an inclusion of more positive goals than previously.

Ray recognizes Voyages 1998 as a valuable experience for future years. Continuing to struggle with evaluation methods and outcomes is on-going process, but the learning curve the first time around is high. “We know what we need to do differently,” Ray said.



A Smoother Trip

It's the journey, not the destination, that makes life what it is. Here are some tips from the Voyages staff that might make your journey a little smoother:

- *Keep groups small.* In our experience, boys of the target age and population were rambunctious and challenging. Although it may mean additional staff, keeping working groups small, or splitting sessions is more conducive to attention and program effectiveness.
- *Figure out ways to make learning and change long-term.* One month of half-day sessions, the time slotted for the Voyages program, is not enough to counteract the negative environmental influences most participants face. Extending the program in the summer, and adding a component that continues during the school year is necessary for behavior and attitudinal changes that may be sparked by the program to solidify in the months ahead.
- *Involve the folks at home.* Because home environments already play a vital role in the lives of participants, resources that target positive involvement from the parents and important adults of Voyages participants might enable the boys to increase their base of support and reinforcement in regard to program goals.
- *Research evaluation and program impact carefully.* Program evaluation should be a tool appropriate for program participants and matched closely to impacts most likely to occur. Finding effective tools and methods is a process worth the effort.



Other Places to Go

The issues unique to the African American male have been centuries in the making, every re-creation lengthening a well-traveled road. Ray points to this long history as indicative of the years ahead needed to truly explore what this history means and come to terms with it for the future. The important lesson here is to celebrate beginnings as just that, and commit to making them the start of paths that will Chris-cross our world in years to come. “This is just a step in the right direction,” Ray said of the Voyages program, “in order for this to really make a difference it has to be long-term.”

Ray stresses the linkages that have made programs like Voyages necessary in the first place: the injuries of discrimination, media images that perpetuate African American males as athletic or entertainment symbols only -- wide-spread institutionalized beliefs that stand as barriers in the road to an African American boy’s journey to emotional and spiritual health. Just as these powerful negative influences are and have been a part of our nation’s foundation, so must a collection of positive forces begin to take hold of our culture and lives. In this respect, the Voyages program is one step of millions.

With both modesty and truth, Ray said that the Voyages program is a good start in our community to take up this journey of change, “but it requires much more than this.” He acknowledges the other issues that planners involved in programs like Voyages should also consider as possible partner initiatives. From increasing Afro-centric education in every school to teacher and staff trainings that address the distinct challenges African American boys face, support and advocacy can broaden. A spirit of curricular change that looks closely at current restrictions and ways to break them down, is needed in education programming everywhere. Ray asks a simple question that focuses in on these limits: Why is there no white history month? The assumption is that we get quite a bit of white history at least eleven months of the year – white history, largely European, is integrated into all parts of our curriculum. Looking at every discipline with a multicultural perspective will only expand the perspective of all learners, making the whole year multicultural -- making every month of learning relevant to every student.

The list goes on. The linkages between one social issue and many others are strong. And so always, as one voyage ends, another begins.

References

Kunjufu, Jawanza. *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*. Chicago: African American Images, 1983.

Osborne, Jason. "Race and Academic Disidentification." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 89, No.4, 1997.

Turner, Ray. *Voyages 1998*.