



Disrupting Educational Spaces: Using School-Based Mentoring Programs to Center African American Males as Public Intellectuals

Webinar Follow-up Question and Answer Session with Elbert Hawkins, III, PhD, NCC, NBCT

Question from Shauna Brooks:

I'd like to better understand "Banking my knowledge" within the human condition.

Answer from Presenter

Good question. The idea of banking knowledge in relation to the human condition is a nod to Paulo Freire's work to dismantle systems of oppression and to disrupt educators' pedagogical practices that fail to create spaces for knowledge production and the creation of new meaning. Educators who align their practice with banking or depositing information into the minds of our students for them to store and regurgitate the information for assessment purposes perpetuate a system of schooling that is rudimentary, restrictive, and weak. It perpetuates the idea of deficit thinking, particularly regarding students of color. As educators, we often fail students of color, especially African American males by not allowing them to incorporate or express who they truly are into the curriculum or within our classroom spaces (e.g. their language, home, community, etc.). In many ways, we define and confine them to their human condition (e.g. home environment, the dominant narrative, their Blackness, etc.), which sometimes dictates the way(s) we choose to educate them. The mentoring program (STARSS) for African American young men that I referenced in the webinar enabled my colleagues and I to educate them on their terms. Meaning, we intentionally started to incorporate their home, community, and school life into their style of learning. We also intentionally incorporated African and African American History and Studies into their academic studies as a way for them to make sense of the world in which they lived. Lastly, we intentionally created learning spaces for them to tell their story and embrace their lived experiences while critically examining social systems within the United States, the idea of systematic oppression, and confronting the idea of whiteness.

Question from Allen Vosburg:

What is your first and foremost direction or objective in getting African American males to accept the idea of being a public intellectual?

Answer from Presenter

Good question. Firstly, my colleagues and I had to establish a relationship with them. An intentional relationship, a relationship that allowed them to feel comfortable and vulnerable within our spaces of learning. Transparently speaking, the idea of building and being in relationship with these young men took time. From the beginning, we created spaces that were authentic and allowed room for personal growth, which required physical and emotional labor. Once we were in relationship and a sense of trust was established, the young

men in the STARSS mentoring program were in a position to listen, explore, and to learn. Secondly, my colleagues and I, in many ways, had to (re)build and expand on their intellectual and academic prowess as a way to build their sense of confidence. To do this, we had to engage them in a learning process that allowed them to unlearn the dominant narrative and norms in relation to their existence and positionality, which was challenging to do within our traditional school space. Centering them as public intellectuals was not an easy feat—my colleagues and I had to meet them where they were academically, socially, and emotionally. Additionally, we had to affirm and place value on their identities, thoughts, beliefs, and more importantly, teach them the importance of affirming and placing value on these human tenets that they embodied. Therefore, we introduced African and African American History and Studies into their course of study—this was a “game changer”. Framing their ideas, thoughts, and experiences within a historical context that centered their Blackness enabled them to critically interrogate systems within the United States from a political, economic, and social viewpoint. However, as educators, we did not force our academic “jargon” or rhetoric onto them—simply, we introduced the material and created the space for them to use their language and experiences to make connections. So, to your question, once a relationship was established and their sense of confidence was nurtured, the young men in STARSS fully embraced and embodied the idea of a public intellectual—defining and reimagining the term for themselves.