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Giving African-American Men their Rightful Place

Teresita Pedraza Moreno
Miami Dade College

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Abstract: The implementation of adult male education programs that adopt the pedagogical strategies developed by the Freedom Schools could serve to address the unemployment crisis of American inner-cities.

I believe that chronic male unemployment lies at the core of the development in the post-Civil Rights era of an inner-city population that must depend on welfare to survive. Often identified as America's underclass, they suffer "long-term deprivation from low education, low employability, low income, and eventually, low self-esteem," (Gilbert, & Kahl, 1987). During the 1950s, inner-city residents although poor were employed (Wilson, 1999). In the early 1970s, structural changes in the national and global economy altered labor market demands. By the 1980s, the impact of those changes, and a growing influx of manual labor immigrants, created a surplus of unskilled workers among which black inner-city residents are overrepresented (Shulman, 2003).

Inner-city chronic unemployment has a negative impact on the area's residents beyond its obvious economic implications. Work is a pivotal institution in society. Time and activities are regulated by the demands of work, "in the absence of regular employment, life, including family life, becomes less coherent," (Wilson, 1999, pp. 480). Work is, therefore, more than a means to earn a living. The socialization of children is geared by the society's expectations of the jobs that they will grow to fulfill. Children internalize those expectations.   In poor African-American neighborhoods, in which female-headed households that rely on welfare for their existence are the norm, the disciplining influence of a work regulated environment is absent. Missing are also the male role models that boys need to emulate. (Popenoe, 1996).

The economic and social cost of this crisis goes far beyond its impact to the affected population. Economic costs are reflected in the utilization of tax dollars that are channeled through a multitude of relief programs, but which are not enough to provide beyond the minimum basic needs for the recipients, nor does the aid contribute to economic development of the area or provide recipients with the necessary marketable skills. Billions of tax dollars are also spent in law enforcement, corrections, and legal services budgets. Male juvenile delinquency increases when the father is absent (Thomas, Farrell and Barnes, 1996; Blankenhorn, 1995). The loss of human capital is staggering for the entire society. Children raised in poverty lag behind in physical and cognitive development, which added to their lack of academic, work skills, and positive social capital, renders them eventually as unemployable adults (Corcoran 1995). Thus, the fate of the parents may be replicated every generation. In the words of Roback Morse (2003) "Think how much the state would save for every young person who can go on to create a life of its own" (p. 59).

The plight of inner-city residents became unequivocally evident to the entire nation in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It is clear that the goals of the Civil Rights Movement were only partially attained, inasmuch as political enfranchisement was not concomitant with economic progress. The images of the devastation left by the hurricane throughout Mississippi, Alabama,

and Louisiana, were followed by those of an insolvent, now displaced and helpless population. The consequences of this natural disaster, and the failure of the Civil Rights movement to improve the living standards of a large proportion of African-Americans, could give rise to a new generation of African-American political activists. The geographical concentration of America's urban poor enhances the prospects of collective action. During the 1950s-1960s decade, the "ecological concentration" of a highly homogenous population in the segregated African-American neighborhoods and universities propitiated the development of the Civil Rights movement under the guidance of a small, but well organized leadership (Wilson, 1973). The impact of the hurricane could provoke mass mobilization due to the perception of what Walsh (1981) identified under the concept of "suddenly imposed grievances," as those affected face the threat of becoming permanently destitute. In addition to its immense human and economic costs, the plight of a population dispossessed and trapped in the mist of highly segregated neighborhoods, bears the potential for igniting again the violent protests that marked the height of the Civil Rights movement.

 In the 1960s, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) improvised new pedagogical strategies to mobilize Mississippi's black rural population. The Freedom Schools attained the goal of political efficacy by impressing upon the disenfranchised the possibilities of an alternative reality. One in which they were actors capable of changing their lives. The use of drama, among other pedagogies adopted by the organizers of the Freedom Schools, has been credited with this achievement (Chilcot & Ligon, 1998). It is time to bring back the freedom schools to achieve the unfulfilled promise of the Civil Rights movement; that of economic progress. To be successful, a program of adult education that aims to provide adult males with the ability to fulfill their economic responsibilities must provide them with a "voice." Those who have considered the possibility of adapting the freedom school model to the present situation claim that "little of the basic intellectual framework needs to be changed," (Payne, 1997, pp. 16). The fundamental assumptions that made the freedom schools successful in the past continue to be, in my opinion, the basic premises on which any effort to revitalize the inner-cities must be grounded. As Charlie Cobb, the proponent of the freedom schools declared, the driving force behind their efforts "was the belief that Black people had to make decisions about and take charge of the things controlling their lives." (Cobb, 1999, pp.134).

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