

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

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Implementing an African-centered community education program: Lessons Learned in Community Psychology Practice

Kyrah K. Brown, Ph.D. (Consultant, CNM Connect) & Angela Scott, M.A. (Head Mistress, Ubuntu Village School)

The purpose of this bulletin is to briefly highlight Ubuntu Village School, an African-centered program located in the northeast community of Wichita, Kansas. We will also describe how Ubuntu Village School's approach and work align well with the guiding principles of community psychology practice.

The aims of this bulletin are to a) briefly describe the approach and work of Ubuntu Village School, an African-centered program located in the northeast community of Wichita, Kansas, and b) describe four lessons learned from this work from a community psychology practice perspective. Many parallels exist between Ubuntu Village's African-centered approach and community psychology principles.

About Ubuntu Village School

Ubuntu Village School (UVS) is a grassroots community education program which emerged out of a desire to design and implement African-centered educational programming for the community. Ubuntu is a Swahili word meaning, "I am because we are" and represents the essential human virtues of family, community, friendship, reciprocity, compassion and humanity. The mission of UVS is to infuse, inspire, and ignite the fullness of one's being using cultural symbols, language, and positive lifestyle practices to heal, transform and empower diverse learners for global leadership. Its overarching goal is for families to discover the goodness in "oneself" and in humanity through worldview learning. Since 2013, UVS has provided African-centered programming for families and K-12th grade students consisting of afterschool academic enrichment and tutoring, Saturday school cultural enrichment, parent engagement and empowerment, and a summer enrichment program focused on civic leadership and social entrepreneurship.

What makes Ubuntu Village School innovative?

- *What happens in communities that are under-resourced and historically marginalized?*
- *What happens when a community generates ideas that are considered unconventional and unfundable?*
- *What happens when the community recognizes their strengths and pull together to meet their own needs?*

Well, innovation happens. Grassroots initiatives and/or African-centered programs are certainly not new. But, what makes UVS innovative is how it served as a new solution for very old problems in this particular community. UVS was created as a direct, grassroots response to community-identified needs. In 2012, following the death of Trayvon Martin and gross injustices occurring in the local community, the Wichita African American Council of Elders hosted equity-focused community village roundtables. From those community roundtables, a small group of individuals dedicated to stabilizing families through education began meeting regularly and eventually pulled their resources together to transform the idea of a village school into a reality. Also, UVS was designed to meet important psychological, educational and cultural needs of African/African-American families in this particular community. The program's approach and activities are informed by and centered in unifying African principles, values and traditions. An African-centered approach places value on respect for human diversity, the complimentary nature of "self" and "community", the principles of cooperation and collective responsibility, and on the contributions of people of African descent to the global community.

Lessons Learned from implementing a Village School: A Community Psychology Perspective

1. Seek out strategic partnerships that promote program sustainability.

UVS is operated by a small volunteer staff. Its ability to thrive is, in large part, due to its strong, strategic partnerships with individuals and organizations. Founding members brought in many of these partnerships early on through their human and fiscal resources. For individuals engaged in program planning or grassroots initiatives, it is important to assess what stakeholders are at the table and what resources can be dedicated to the initiative. Another strategy that UVS implemented was the Ujima Collective which was created to build a network of individual, agency, and organizational partners and to systematically address issues beyond the scope of one group. Ujima is a Swahili word meaning "collective work and responsibility" which speaks to how UVS and other entities must work together to accomplish shared goals. UVS partners with service organizations, nonprofits, business and other community-based groups. As a part of this strategy, a considerable amount of thought goes into how a potential partnership may create additional opportunities. One of these partners is Holy Savior Catholic Academy (HSCA) which provides in-kind use of facilities and resources for UVS. HSCA is located in the heart of the northeast Wichita community and opens its doors to families and students from diverse racial, economic and religious backgrounds. This strategic, mutually beneficial partnership has ensured that the HSCA student body and the surrounding community have access to the benefits of UVS programming. HSCA has also played a key role in supporting UVS' infrastructure, growth and sustainability. For example, HSCA principal's affiliation with service and faith-based groups has led to new partnerships as well as gaining 501c(3) status.

2. Be intentional and clear about your program's goals and values.

The process of forming new partnerships isn't always easy. UVS staff have learned the importance of being intentional in relationship building with other organizations. Before establishing partnerships these key questions are asked: *What is the goal of this partnership? How can our organizations help one another? How will this partnership benefit the children and the community? Do we share the same vision*

and values? By engaging in these questions early on, UVS has been able to form more meaningful and sustainable relationships. UVS has also used a similar line of questioning with funding opportunities. This is because there is great value placed on program integrity and shared values. A major lesson learned is that not all opportunities for partnerships are going to have a shared vision nor are they always in the best interest of the population your program serves. It is important to remember that, although you may be a small program or initiative, it is okay to stay true to your values and be intentional about who you partner with.

3. Identify clear roles with families to promote meaningful program engagement.

In addition to partnerships, parent and community engagement have been key to the success of UVS. There is a saying at UVS that, “everyone in the village has a role.” This saying speaks to the program’s approach to promoting meaningful engagement. A common challenge for many programs is trying to get family or community members to be consistently involved and perhaps develop self-directed engagement (in other words a ‘get in where you fit in’ approach). To address this challenge, UVS used surveys and informal discussions with parents to develop an understanding of what roles they felt the most comfortable performing. Using that information, staff continuously work with parent to establish and validate their role. Some parents are solely responsible for bringing snacks and others may help facilitate lessons. Although every parent is not actively engaged, there is a dedicated group of parents who remain engaged because they are serving a very clear role that contributes to program success. It is important for practitioners to understand that sometimes we hold assumptions about what constitutes meaningful engagement. In practice, though, it is important to encourage families to define what meaningful engagement realistically looks like for themselves and we must adjust.

4. Explore creative community engagement strategies to promote program input.

Since its inception, UVS has strived to respond to community need and provide a space where community innovation can be nurtured. UVS staff uses evaluation to gather feedback from students and parents and inform curriculum and program improvement. This year, UVS partnered with a service organization to implement a Rites of Passage program for African American boys. A major challenge of this initiative was the recruitment and retention of male volunteers. Also, in line with community psychology values, UVS staff wanted to make sure the Rites of Passage curriculum was responsive to students’ community context. As a result, a short open-ended survey was launched to obtain feedback from African American men on what they felt were important topics or issues they wish they would have been taught. Survey respondents provided insightful information which helped to inform curriculum development. In addition, as a recruitment strategy, at the end of the survey male respondents were invited to sign up to be volunteers for the program. In doing so, a group of male volunteers, who were invested in the topic, were recruited to the program. This strategy was guided by thinking of community members as experts which is well aligned with community psychology practice values. It is important to remember that our communities hold expertise that can inform program development and improvement. Also, some community engagement strategies can be simple, yet effective.

To learn more about Ubuntu Village School, visit <http://ubuntuvillageschool.blogspot.com>.

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.