

# To Inspire, Connect and Educate (ICE): A DC Metro Effort Advances a Minority Cultural Wealth Model of Youth Development

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In 2013, a group of impassioned African American male educators identified concerns related to the educational preparation of young men and women of color (YM and WC) in their proximal geographic area. The cadre of teachers and administrators were cognizant of the dire educational statistics for this population of YM and WC and the challenges to successful transition from high school to college and the workforce.

Their focus was to develop the academic, social, and interpersonal skills of African American and Latino students in elementary, middle and high school in order to ultimately position them for success in all areas of their lives. Representing various disciplines in education, this group of dedicated professionals embarked upon a creative problem-solving process, which included the formation of strategic alliances with community and civic organizations to address several of these concerns in tangible ways.

One result of their efforts was the creation of the Inspire, Connect, Educate (ICE), Conference, as spearheaded by the first author of this essay. For the last three years consecutively,

ICE has presented informal educational experiences and opportunities that target YM and WC. These activities are geared towards providing YM and WC a form of social capital that can better prepare them to make these transitions. This essay, co-written with a second author, who is an education scholar, frames the efforts to create and sustain ICE as an example of a community outreach that conforms to Yosso's cultural wealth model.<sup>1</sup>

## What is ICE?

With an expressed purpose to inspire, connect, and educate, as indicated by its acronym, this annual conference and mentorship program seeks to accomplish the following through dynamic keynote speakers and workshop facilitators.

Young men of color will be *inspired* to hope and desire more of themselves and from their lives by *connecting* them to positive role models—many of whom are from their same ethnic heritage—and *educating* them with a wealth of information and resources about the ways to succeed in high school, post-secondary education, and the workforce.<sup>2</sup>

These three concepts function as governing constructs that dictate ICE's purpose and aim.

For the first conference in 2014, ICE focused on three areas for our 6th through 12th grade students in the DC Metro area. They were: (1) high school readiness, (2) higher education readiness, and (3) career readiness skills.

<sup>1</sup> Yosso, T. J. 2005. Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91, doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006.

<sup>2</sup> Inspire. Connect. Educate. (2015) <http://ice-master-class2015.whindo.com/event/default.aspx?lock=2440640-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0&key=6751d02283873bc>.

We understood then, and still understand today, that exposure and access are too often shielded from specific populations that may need it the most. It can seem that only those born into families in the majority, whose knowledge is already deemed valuable, have access to the knowledge possessed by those in the middle and upper class—as well as the potential for social mobility through formal schooling that it provides.<sup>3</sup>

We set out to assemble professionals who were experts in their field from various institutions and sectors of society such as Temple University, University of Kentucky, Prince George County Public Schools, Fairfax County Public Schools, University of Maryland, PNC Bank and other highly qualified professionals to help improve the education outcomes of people of color within these communities. For us, it was not sufficient merely to have quality professionals, but it was also important that we ensured that these individuals—who would have the attention and time of students—have a proven record of being good role models, in every sense of the word.

The conference’s core mission intentionally relates to the structure of the day’s events, which include the keynote address, workshops, and mentorship. Because of this structure, we begin our conference with the keynote address, which aims to align with the core value of *inspiring* our youth to listen to and engage with highly successful black men—men who can share their stories and wisdom with the audience in a way that is relatable to their current lives. By exposing our students to keynote speakers like DeMaurice Smith, an African-American who is the executive director of the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA), we show our students that there are other voices and be-

liefs with which they can identify. The presence of these persons, by being members of their own communities who have achieved financial and professional success, brings a message of legitimacy and meaning from their larger community that counters the majority view.

In addition, the conference offers workshops through which our youth are connected to the nine-month “Bridge Builders” program, which is a local mentorship program that offers our youth examples of positive and consistent role models within their larger community and within the Operation Uplift Foundation.<sup>4</sup> The organization strives to provide students with enhanced development and growth opportunities to advance their academics and social goals. We believe that this year-round approach to walking alongside young men will allow the youth to build longer lasting relationships and provides support for their future goals and ongoing endeavors.

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Our view of mentorship is grounded in our commitments. For example, we draw from Tony Dungy’s book, *The Mentor Leader: Secrets to Building People and Teams That Win Consistently*. In that book, Dungy quotes Mark 10:45 from the Bible. Dungy urges his readers to remember that mentor leadership is all about serving. He invokes Jesus Christ as the ultimate model of servant leadership.<sup>5</sup> As this scripture states, “for even the Son of Man came not to be served but

<sup>3</sup> Yosso, T. J. 2005. Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91, doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006.

<sup>4</sup> Operation Uplift. (20015). [www.opuplift.org](http://www.opuplift.org).

<sup>5</sup> Dungy, T., and Whitaker, N. 2011. *The Mentor Leader*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House.

to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Our conferences will continue to position our young men and woman in front of mentors that build them up by giving back to the community with their time, talents and resources. Ultimately, we want to build a strong network around our students so that they have a variety of kinds of support and resources to ensure they are prepared for their pursuits of higher education or skilled training.

Through our workshops and mentoring sessions, we ensure that we are giving our youth the most current and useful information possible, so that our goal of educating and equipping the next generation is being accomplished. In the first author’s own story as a child, he remembers hearing an unknown author quote: “the best way to hide something from black people is to put it in a book.” This sparked a flame inside of him to inquire more deeply about learning and investigating his world around him with a critical lens. It is his belief that knowledge and being literate are essential for our national and local youth of color.

For our first conferences in the DC Metro area, we wanted to ensure that those who were presenting were passing on truths and nuggets of knowledge that could be useful for students’ lives today. Offering workshops like: “Funding Your Future,” “Handling Homework Hassle,” “STEM: Welcome to Genetics,” “Your Internet Face: Building A Strong Online Presence” and “Do You Know Your Communication Style.” These are just a few of the workshops that were offered in year one that were able to educate and expose our students to the career and higher education readiness skills that they would need in their near future.

By educating our youth in these key topics and information, we aimed to equip students with the knowledge of the pathway to academic and social success. The conference actively engaged so they would be eligible and ready for higher education and the larger world context. Society speaks of an education gap between

whites and blacks: but there is also a potential gap in exposure and experiences. This gap must be filled if we are to give our youth the ability and opportunities needed to reach beyond the stereotypical limits that are imposed upon them.

## Social Capital as Minority Cultural Capital

In structuring this conference to advance a constructive perspective of the history and lived experiences of communities of color, ICE presupposes a critical race narrative of such experiences, one situated within the broader American story. Yosso explains that Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education “refutes the dominant ideology and white privilege while validating and centering the experiences of People of Color.”<sup>6</sup>

Young black and Hispanic men need to understand that they are in no way inherently flawed and that they are not a problem plaguing the public education system (or our society). If one listens to the national dialogue or examines society’s representations of these stories, it comes across as if minorities in general can be reduced to an issue to be addressed—one that is in need of being fixed—without calling into the question the prevailing cultural and political environment. CRT, as a transformative theorization of the basis of racialized inequality in education, problematizes the antecedent systems and other societal structures of American society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Yosso, T. J. 2005. Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 73, doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006.

<sup>7</sup> Howard, T. C., and Navarro, O. 2016. Critical race theory 20 years later: Where do we go from here? *Urban Education*, 51(3), 253–273, doi:10.1177/0042085915622541.

ICE's theory of action—as fundamentally a positive assertion of minority cultural worth—is shown in that one of ICE's goals is to communicate to YW and WC that they have experiences from which their nation and world can benefit. They are powerful beyond measure in their ability to shape their perception of their lived experiences. In this vein, ICE aims to construct an environment that counters deficit thinking. Chapman explains that education policy has been based on a deficit paradigms of racial groups.<sup>8</sup> Deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) Students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) Parents neither value nor support their child's education.

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The racialized assumptions about the deficiencies of communities of color most often lead schools to default to the banking method of education as described by Paulo Freire.<sup>9</sup> This approach reifies social divisions based on race by preparing YM and WC to fulfill a subservient role in society. Rather than being given the opportunity to engage in high-order thinking

and acquire critical literacy, they are shuttled through classes that equip them merely in the most basic skills. The ICE conference has the goal of connecting these youth with educated individuals who will speak candidly to them about the effort that educational success will demand, while walking alongside them in their developmental journey.

The idea of being connected to a larger network of support is essential for ICE's mission. The literature on youth civic activism depicts civic engagement as being extremely valuable for holistic youth development as well as for the society in which it takes place.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, African-American youth have historically been more likely to engage in civic activism than any other ethnic group, according to The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.<sup>11</sup>

During the second year of our conference, we exposed our students to a workshop called “Master Class for Service in the Community.” In this workshop, Senior Pastor Reverend Michelle C. Thomas instructed our students in ways in which they can get involved in their schools, communities, and local non-for-profit organizations. She was able to communicate to our youth that connecting with people that have diverse backgrounds is essential to the betterment of self and the community. It was sessions like this that brought research on youth activism and critical race theory out of the academia and into the real world.

<sup>8</sup> Chapman, T. K. 2013. You can't erase race! Using CRT to explain the presence of race and racism in majority white suburban schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(4), 611-627, doi:10.1080/01596306.2013.822619.

<sup>9</sup> Freire, P. 1968/1998. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (M. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Bloomsbury.

<sup>10</sup> Carillo, K. 2007. Black Youth Most Politically Active. *Crisis*, 114(1), 10-10. Chung, H. L., and Probert, S. 2011. Civic engagement in relation to outcome expectations among African American young adults. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 32(4), 227-234, doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2011.02.009. Boyte, H. C. 2003. A different kind of politics: John Dewey and the meaning of citizenship in the 21stc. *The Good Society*, 12(2), 1-15, doi:10.1353/gso.2004.0004.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://civicyouth.org/>.

## The Cultural Wealth Model of Capital

The insidiousness of deficit thinking can be a consequence of conventional knowledge about the means towards social mobility. According to this view most clearly articulated by Bourdieu and Passeron, upward movement in the social hierarchy requires that individuals possess the habits, practices and skills that the society most values.<sup>12</sup> The range of experiences, knowledge and perspective available to middle and upper-middle class society are the social mobility currency in a highly-stratified society.

Yosso invokes CRT analysis to question the purely descriptive status of Bourdieu and Passeron's theories. There is an argument that negative assumptions about the efficacy of diverse family systems and community values at work in minority neighborhoods and communities of color is also influencing the conventional definition of social capital. If one assumes generative potential in communities of color, rather than deficiency, the community's cultural values, practices and beliefs can offer alternate resources, which also can translate to mainstream aspirational values such as pursuing higher education. Yosso proposes multifarious sources of cultural capital, in aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant forms.

Under the umbrella of ICE core principle of inspiration, Yosso's six forms of are salient. Our team knows the value of families of color and that their experience and community structure can support school goals and positive youth development. Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti describe this cultural knowledge base as culturally embedded *funds of knowledge*.<sup>13</sup> It is evi-

dent, for example, when within the home, students are learning a spoken language and its contextual terms and meaning that will help them navigate the various cultures and arenas that they will need to master in their daily lives. Most of our students of color have to learn really quickly how to have the "double consciousness" that W.E.B Du Bois spoke of in *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>14</sup>

In what follows, we look at Yosso's forms of capital and consider how they connect with ICE's work.

### Aspirational capital

Our key pillar of inspiration exemplifies the first form: aspirational capital. Through the conference keynote speakers that we bring to our students, we attempt to enhance and maintain our students' hopes and dreams for the future by presenting strong black men that come from similar circumstances as they do. In this way, they can see real strategies for how to face and overcome possible barriers. The ICE conference strives to push students to dream of all the possibilities that are in the world, so that our students are not limited by their current condition in their options for goals and aspirations. Students' zip codes or parental status should not be the determining principle of their end result in life. We aspire to continue to place highly successful men and woman in front of our students that will ignite a stronger passion to push toward or beyond their dreams.

### Linguistic capital

The 2015 conference featured two high school social workers, both of whom conducted a workshop for our students. This workshop trained them in the social skills that can be

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu, P., and Passeron, J. 1977/1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications.

<sup>13</sup> Gonzalez, N., Moll, L. C., and Amanti, C. 2009. *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> DuBois, W.E. B. 1903/1967. *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett.

gained through communication exercises and experiences with different types of individuals. We know our students come to schools with an array of languages and communication styles, as far ranging as Spanish to street vernacular. By approaching our students in the right way, we can show them that any linguistic capital they bring has value, no matter what end of the spectrum their particular communication style is. Our goal is to show our students that within the real-world context, each of these has a place and can be used to their benefit and enhancement. Our students will then know that what they are gaining in their family context has value beyond the four walls of their home.

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## Familial capital

Familial capital is valued highly in our vision through our engagement with families, mentors, and youth. If one serves in the public schools, the diverse family structure of many children, including mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and grandparents, is evident. Because our students come from a plethora of backgrounds, we partner with faith groups, local organizations, and schools to ensure that we are building lasting relationships with those parental figures that have influence over the development of our youth. We want our families to know that they have a partner in ICE and Operation Uplift that will assist them in securing their

child's hopes and dreams for the future. Building this network of social bonds with families ensures a strong web of community resources being poured into students' lives.

## Social capital

Each year of our conference we encourage our workshop presenters and our students to network with each other so that students can enhance their opportunities for higher education or securing employment in their future. For example, our conference and networking sessions for our students often involve several members of the Divine Nine of the National Pan-Hellenic Council.

Last year, the first hour of our conference was set up for our students to build their social connections within our networking session. Various organizations and vendors showcased their services and activities to parents and students who are seeking opportunities for mentoring and networking with local organizations. The goal was to be determine whether these organizations had the resources that would help to enhance YM and WC and their ability to advance educationally.

The resources that were offered were along the lines of mentorship programs, math and science camps, or career internship opportunities. From these examples that “we learn the importance of maintaining a healthy connection to our community and its resources.”<sup>15</sup> Because of these connections, our young men of color will expand their awareness of the social network within their area and gain additional resources to project them forward in their future success.

As another example, during our 2015 conference, two African-American male residential

<sup>15</sup> Yosso, T. J. 2005. Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 79, doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006.

directors from one of the local Washington DC college campuses conducted a workshop on residential life. This workshop helped our students to prepare for what student life or residential life on a college campus is like and to take advantage of the multifarious offerings that are available to on-campus students within the residential halls.

Because our middle and high school students are getting this information proactively, they are seeing that they have allies, now and in the future, when navigating the ins and outs of future pathways, such as a university campus. Each year our conference is in session, we ensure that there are career or human resource specialists on board to lead workshops that help our students of color understand strategies to approach the employment and hiring processes. We realize that in order for our students to be marketable and competitive, they need to be equipped with knowledge in resume building, interviewing and networking skills. If our students learn to grasp these skills, they will have a best chance of guiding themselves through the unspoken rules of schools, the workplace or society.

### **Navigational capital**

Navigational capital is a resource with which our conference strives to equip our students so that they can understand how to negotiate public or private institutions that were not established with them in mind. In his experience, the first author remembers attending a small, Christian, liberal arts school in central Indiana and realizing that there were people who had never seen or interacted with a young black male before, other than the representation in popular culture of their television or local movie theatre.

Being presented with this situation caused him and others to be aware that he should shy away from certain areas of the country, state or

communities because of their perceived or realistic threat of racial hostility. Even though this reality was not new to him, it still caused him to recalibrate his thinking about his college experience in order to cope with the sense of alienation. Thankfully, most people of color are constantly aware of the idea of navigational capital because they must enter and exit the dominant white society on a regular basis. So, the rules of engagement and interaction are learned and practiced within our daily lives.

### **Resistant capital**

In today's society, we must continue to educate our youth to be aware of their environments, so that if they are placed in a vulnerable context, they are equipped to respond in constructive ways. As Yosso states, "strategies to navigate through racially-hostile university campuses draw on the concept of academic invulnerability, or students' ability to sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school and, ultimately dropping out of school."<sup>16</sup>

In 2001, the incoming freshman class at the first author's college was one of the largest numbers of young men of color in the university's history. But, sadly, four years later, only two black males graduated with a degree. He was one of the two young men of color that acquired the degree. This experience, of navigating institutions of learning, workplace or local communities that were not established with structures that supported the success of young black males, was not solely his own experience. Countless other African-American, Hispanic and female individuals must confront these issues on a daily basis to ensure their future success in American culture. It was so even in the age of President Obama—and continues to be

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<sup>16</sup> Yosso, *ibid*, 80.

case, post the first African American presidency.

Contemporary writers such as Julius Bailey in his text, *Racial Realities and Post-Racial Dreams: The Age of Obama and Beyond*,<sup>17</sup> or Michelle Alexander in her text, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*,<sup>18</sup> focus on our current situations of people of color within the system of public education, politics and public policy. The ICE conference directly confronts these issues so that students of color are exposed to new schools of thought and information so that their arsenal of information around social institutions is sound and prepares them to make effective choices in their own lives. Youth of color need to be equipped with the tools to recognize and dismantle systems of oppression.

The idea of resistant capital teaches our youth to challenge the inequities they see in their schools, communities or local governments. Our conference wants to instruct students to fully engage in behaviors that goes against the status quo, such as black males not being literate, college educated or family oriented. As Dr. Ivory Toldson (2008), Howard University Professor states, “a lot of the information we get is all about [black males’] problems, but not anything about what it takes to help them achieve at an optimal level. So, what I wanted to do with my first “Breaking Barriers” report was to de-emphasize the cross-group comparisons.”<sup>19</sup>

## Mobilizing Funds of Knowledge to Create Unique Pathways of Success

Our goal is not to compare our black youth to white or Asian students, but to highlight those persons from their various communities that have achieved success. Operation Uplift’s mentorship program and the ICE conference look to shine a bright light on the truth about our youth of color, so that they can see effective ways of being successful from individuals that come from their home communities.

Toldson maintains that there has been the assumption that, for black males to achieve, they must be like other race groups. But there are other paths to success.<sup>20</sup> Depending on where our youth come from, there is a common thread to the pathway of success and we look to expose our youth to various presenters, workshop leaders, and mentors that can articulate those blueprinted plans for our young men and woman. For those of us who have achieved or maintained some arena of success, our stories or testimonies should not be bottled inside of our minds. They should be—and are meant to be—shared with the younger generation that come from our same metaphorical neighborhood blocks.

In the DC Metro area, our goal is to shift the mindset of our community toward a resiliency orientation in a strength-based approach to education, community engagement and political commentary. Our students of color deserve to see and hear positive interpretations of Black or Hispanic males that can magnify these strategies designed to enhance their strengths and skills, not highlight their problems in their communities.

<sup>17</sup> Bailey, J. 2016. *Racial Realities and Post-Racial dreams: The Age of Obama and Beyond*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander, M. 2016. *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.

<sup>19</sup> Toldson, I. A. 2008. *Breaking Barriers: Plotting the Path to Academic Success for School-age African-American Males*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc.

<sup>20</sup> Toldson, I. A. 2008. *Breaking Barriers: Plotting the Path to Academic Success for School-age African-American Males*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc.

For those wishing to follow our path, we suggest presenting clear indications of ways of success, ensuring a sense of safety for our youth, and having black males read written works from other black males. It could be hoped that society would cease plastering our youth with negative and false statistics about black males and that there actually would be more substantive conversations. We have to change our mindset in our approach to foster resilient men and women of color, so that we are pushing them forward.

Sadly, if students are not exposed to a K-12 educator who consciously and intentionally encourages our youth to be writers and artists in the likes of W.E.B Du Bois, Alice Walker or Frederick Douglass, our students will not get the core foundation of ICE: to be inspired, connected and educated by those who have a similar hue or shade that they have. For the first author, almost 21 years of his life passed before he was a part of an institution of learning that engaged him in critical analysis of some of these prominent American writers. ICE's aim is to be more proactive with minority youth of today and to share these ideals with them while they are growing within their K-12 experience.

## Conclusion

The ICE conference has a very defined mission of providing YM and WC the resources to envision a different life than that which could be immediately before them in their own lived experiences and that which is represented generally in American culture. It provides access to community social networks by which relationships of mentoring can be established for the year. Through the keynote speakers, workshops and mentoring, ICE delivers the cultural capital that supports students in leveraging their cultural background and experiences to aid them in navigating the dominant culture.

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