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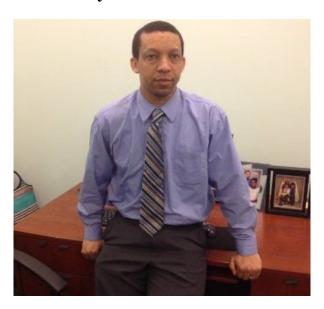# *Philosophos*

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With Dr. Jun Nara, Sky Business

'Re-building New Family Relations'

Today's Guest Professor

Mark Echols, Ph.D.

Family Team Conference Facilitator,
Abbott House
&
Curriculum Designer,
Ed4Online.com

Today, we do welcome a wonderful guest professor from New York, the US: Dr. Mark Echols. As our previous guest professor, Dr. Rom Gayoso, Prof. Echols is also one of my friends at Capella University. He is a specialist in the field of family services, especially relationship

building, couples counseling, father's rights and advocacy, and parent education for African American families and children.

Recently, Prof. Echols has just finished his long academic journey. He successfully passed the defense exam in September, 2014, after completing his dissertation, 'Can Resiliency in Black Adolescent Males Be Correlated with Parenting Style?' His Ph.D. was officially conferred in October, 2014. As a scholar-practitioner, he is still tackling societal issues related to family relations and education in community.

In today's program, we ask Prof. Echols about his educational background including research, his commitment to his working places, lessons and philosophy he has learned from his work experiences.

From Community College to Ph.D.

－Hello, Prof. Mark Echols. Thank you very much for your joining this educational program as Guest Professor. First of all, I would like to congratulate on earning your Ph.D. in Human Behavior from Capella University. I think all of your related people -your family, relatives, friends, other professors and teachers, and colleagues- are truly pleased with your academic success. It's not so hard for me to imagine that you had to overcome some difficulties -course works, thesis and dissertation, exams, balance between your studies and work and family, and financial matter as many people experience. If you don't mind, please share your educational background with us. After finishing high school, you attended community college. Are you the first generation of college student in your family? What was the toughest aspect of your school and university life? How did you manage such difficulty?

Prof. Echols: Thank you Dr. Jun Nara for the warm welcome! It is an honor and privilege to serve as a guest professor with Philosophos. The journey from community college to Ph.D. has been 20 years in the making, and it is one I am very proud of. I am a second generation college student. My father was the first person in my family to earn a college degree (he has an associate and bachelor's degree). My mother also has an associate degree. Of my generation I am the second person to graduate from college (my eldest brother was the first), although I am the only person to have earned a Ph.D.

I have been blessed with a very supportive family, so I did not have to overcome many personal obstacles in my educational journey; however, I did have to overcome a lack of academic

preparation, which is an obstacle many African American males face entering college. In high school I was placed in a general education program which was not designed for college preparation. As a result, I did not take foreign languages or any AP Math or Science classes. The expectation of most students in the general education program was they would not attend college, and for the majority of my time in high school I believe I performed according to low expectations. I did not decide I wanted to attend college until the last semester of my senior year. When I decided I was interested in college I had missed all SAT exam dates, so getting into a university probably was not going to happen. This is when I started looking at community colleges, which had the added bonus of being more affordable as well.

I credit the community college system as being a foundation for my eventual educational success. Community colleges are known for having open admissions in comparison to universities which require admissions tests, minimum GPAs, and minimum SAT scores. Community colleges are also known for giving students who did not have strong academic preparation a chance to improve their academic skills. I looked at community college as a second chance to do well in school and an opportunity to learn skills I needed to support myself. From the beginning I applied myself at community college in a way I had not done in high school. I excelled from my first course until I earned my associate degree. By the time I finished my associate degree I had confidence in my ability to be successful in college.

― What a wonderful story you have! Then, you transferred to four-year college and earned a bachelor's degree. Also, you earned your Master's degree in Counseling Studies and Ph.D. in Human Behavior from Capella. One of the Capella's educational purposes is to train the next generation of 'Scholar-Practitioners.' How did you link your work experience to the theories in the classroom, or the theories in the classroom to your work experience? Do you think your learning experience at Capella is beneficial to your working place?

Prof. Echols: My desire to return to school and earn a master's degree was to become a better case worker. When I first started working with children and families in the child welfare systems, I had some experience with case management, but I was not trained in either social work or mental health. The majority of the clients I worked with had mental health or substance abuse disorders, and I did not feel I was addressing all of their needs because my lack of training. I felt I owed it to my clients and myself to gain the skills necessary to address their needs and become a better case planner. This desire is what lead to my enrollment at Capella University.

The classes I took at Capella were relevant to my work with children and families. I immediately applied class concepts focusing on mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, human development, and family environment to solving challenges at my job. Similarly, I also used work experiences for class papers and assignments. One of the most enjoyable aspects of applying class theories to my work with children and families is that I understood their needs better and could come up with more appropriate interventions to assist them.

－Many people in the US and other English speaking countries attend graduate school because they are eager to have new knowledge and skills for their present and future jobs. By the way, Recently, you completed your dissertation. Why did you choose this research topic? How did you conduct your research? And, what was/were your major finding/s?

Prof. Echols: My research topic was an exploration of resiliency development. Resiliency is a trait which has been identified as allowing individuals to thrive despite having to overcome difficult circumstances. I found the concept of resiliency to be particularly relevant for African American youth, as many come from impoverished backgrounds without the family, educational, and community support systems which help other people achieve success. The lack of opportunities (educational and economic) and family support contributes to the high rates of crime and violence seen in many African American communities. Although many fail to overcome the challenges of their environment, there are many African American youth who thrive regardless of their circumstances. What allows these young men and women to thrive despite their circumstances is resiliency. Of course the concept of resiliency can apply to any group, not just African Americans; however, the fascinating mystery of this trait is no one has been able to determine what causes it. Why is one person resilient and not another? Why are there differences in resiliency within the same community, within the same street, even within the same family? My research sought to answer these questions. Specifically I sought to find whether a correlation could be made between resiliency and parenting style for African American adolescent males.

A relationship has never been established between parenting style and resiliency for African American males. Since this relationship had never been established in prior studies, it was necessary to establish whether a correlation existed. As a result, I chose a methodology which was appropriate to determine the existence of a correlation. I conducted my study as a

non-experimental quantitative design with self-report studies for data collection. The target population for the study was African American adolescent males 18-20 years old who were enrolled in college. College students were chosen because it was believed they would have higher rates of resiliency, which would allow for a comparison with parenting style. The study looked at interval data collected and analyzed with the Parental Authority Questionnaire (Buri, 1991) and the Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents (Prince-Embury, 2006). One hundred African American male college students were investigated by the three scales of the Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents to determine their levels of resiliency. The participants then completed the Parental Authority Questionnaire, which determined if they were raised under a permissive, authoritative, or authoritarian parenting style. In addition, a brief demographic questionnaire obtained the race, educational background, income level, and family environment of the participants.

To analyze the data for the study, I scored the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) and the Resiliency Scales for Children & Adolescents (RES) for each research participant. Scoring the PAQ consisted of totaling the answers to 30 questions: 10 for authoritarian, 10 for authoritative, and 10 for permissive. The higher score indicated the parenting style, which I used to correlate to the individual participants' resiliency scores. I scored the RES by totaling the responses to two scales and averaging them for a T-score. Following the RES score, I used the T-score to correlate with the PAQ score. Both scores were then entered into SPSS to obtain the correlation coefficient. The major findings of the study was 95 out of the 100 participants who completed the RES measured average to high in resiliency. Due to the high number of participants that measured resilient under both authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles, correlations were calculated separately for maternal authoritarian, maternal authoritative, paternal authoritarian, and paternal authoritative. The research finding was there is no correlation between parenting style and the development of resiliency behaviors in African American adolescent males, with the exception of the paternal authoritative parenting style, where the Pearson correlation coefficient was r .472.

Although the study concluded there is no positive correlation between parenting style and resilient behaviors in African American adolescent males, the findings offer support for more recent research done on parenting style in the African American community: The findings offer support that authoritarian parenting styles are not perceived negatively by African American adolescents and that fathers positively influence the educational attainment of African American adolescents. The study challenges previous research suggesting a positive relationship between

authoritative parenting and resiliency and a negative relationship between authoritarian parenting and resiliency for adolescents. In light of the study's findings, exploring additional supportive factors for the African American adolescent males who participated in the study may explain why they had such high rates of resiliency as a group. A more detailed summary of the dissertation research has been included as a power point presentation.

－To a Japanese man like me, it's an interesting fact from your survey that 'Authoritarian parenting styles are not perceived negatively by African American adolescents and fathers positively influence the educational attainment of African American adolescents.' In Japan, especially in my generation (age 30s), I no longer find any authoritative fathers though there used to be many in my parents' generation (laughter). How about your father? Would you kindly describe your father's personality and parenting style? In your point of view, do you think your father's parenting style has greatly affected your academic and career achievements?

Prof. Echols: My father was more authoritarian than authoritative (I actually would say both my parents were); however, I felt supported and loved by my parents. I was influenced by my father to have a family and to provide for them. This more than anything influenced my academic and career achievements, not by my father's parenting style. I know from personal experience that it is possible to feel loved and supported under an authoritarian parenting style, although some parents may have traits of other parenting styles as well. As a result of this, my data results were not completely surprising. It is my belief that many of the young men who participated in my study felt supported by their parents even though they had an authoritarian parenting style. However, I would need to conduct qualitative or mix-method research to say this with certainty.

Social Services: Re-building the Family
－You have over 14-year-working experience as a social worker and worked with children and families, especially African American people, in educational and social service settings. What is/are your original reason/s to become a social worker?

Prof. Echols: I initially wanted to become a teacher and worked in the school system for 5 years starting in 2000. While working in the school system, I also had an opportunity to serve as a case manager (the position was called a follow-up worker) at an after-school program for "at-risk youth". This program was mainly attended by African American and Hispanic students who were identified as being at high risk for delinquency and/or dropping out of school. The

majority of the children came from low-income communities and they struggled in the classroom because of unstable home environments. Working at the after-school program made me realize for many students the challenge of school wasn't learning, but being able to focus and find relevancy in education when they had to deal with what they would eat that night or where they would sleep. I became inspired to enter social work/child welfare to address the issues I could not as a teacher.

－I see... Briefly introduce your present working places, Abbott House and Ed4Online.com. What are your main duties there?

Prof. Echols: Abbott House is a foster care agency. I am aware that foster care does not exist in every country, so I will try to briefly describe what it is. Foster care is a system to take care of children who have been removed from their families of birth. The majority of the children who are removed from their families are due to abuse or because the parents are unable to care for their children (usually because of substance abuse or mental illness). There are less common cases where children come into foster care because they were orphaned or because their parents voluntarily place them due to unsafe behaviors. A foster care agency will work with families to address the concern that brought their children into care. The primary goal of foster care is always to reunite families; however, foster care agencies will look for alternative goals such as adoption if reunification is not possible.

When I first entered foster care, I worked as a case planner. As a Case Planner, I worked with birth parents towards achieving the goal of re-unification or permanency for their children in foster care. I referred biological parents to substance abuse programs, mental health services, parenting skills classes, domestic violence classes, and other court mandated services (specific to each case). I also arranged visitation between birth parents and their children (this included monitoring visits to ensure the safety of children and to encourage positive interaction). In addition, I arranged and collaborated with clinical staff to address children's on-going needs (medical and mental health). I also documented all efforts made for families, and provided progress reports & testimony to New York Family Courts.

For the past 5 years, I have worked as a Family Team Conference (FTC) Facilitator. The closest comparison I can give for this position is a consultant and policy expert. As a FTC Facilitator I meet with birth parents and families to discuss their progress towards achieving the goal of reunification for children in foster care. I also meet with foster parents and children to discuss

their progress towards achieving alternative permanency (which means where they will live on a permanent basis) goals of adoption, fit & willing relative, and independent living. In addition to this, I also address issues of safety and permanency while facilitating conferences.

My work at Ed4Online.com is more of a departure from Abbott House and is educationally based. Ed4Online.com is an adult continuing education website. Ed4Online.com offers adult education classes to individuals and universities. I am a subject matter expert in the area of Health and Human Services. I create curriculum for online continued education courses. This includes writing professional papers on a variety of topics with measurable objectives with an accompanying quiz and PPTs based on the paper's content. I also collaborate with the curriculum design team to create current topics of interest for continued education in the health and human services field.

－It may be very difficult to summarize the reasons, but in your point of view what are main causes of the problems with human relations in family? If it is OK, would you tell us the most striking story in your working experience? How did you help such people?

Prof. Echols: Some of the common problems which cause dysfunction are stressors in the environment and the family. These stressors include: A lack of communication, a lack of money due to unemployment or underemployment, a lack of education, differences in parenting style, parenting philosophy, sexuality, and family background (two-parent, single parent, etc). The problems experienced in families often result in some of the societal problems we see today like substance abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, and child abuse. I have found that many of these environmental stressors are the ultimate reasons which bring families into the child welfare system.

Unfortunately due to confidentiality, I am unable to share specific examples or detailed stories of my work experience. However, I can say that the most disheartening trend of foster care is the number of families who have prior child welfare experience. There are many parents involved in foster care, who were themselves foster children. In some cases, the grandparents were also foster children. It is my professional opinion that one of the primary failings of the child welfare system is it does not address the needs of families from a multi-generational perspective. If there is a family which has had patterns of substance abuse dating back to 2 or 3 successive generations, it is necessary to factor that history into any intervention which is given.

My approach as a case planner and a facilitator has remained the same. I have worked with families through the use of empathy, by giving respect to parents, and most importantly letting them know I want to help them. The majority of parents are extremely angry when they first come to the child welfare system, and their anger is understandable. They have had their children taken away from them, and while they may not have provided a safe environment for their children, they do love them. I have always let families know that my first priority is to reunite families, not to keep them apart. I also let them know I am there to help them. I have found when families understand foster care agencies want to help them, not to hurt them, it is comforting. Of course not every family is going to be reunited because many parents fail to address the behaviors which brought their children into foster care, but it is important to let parents know you want to help.

－If a child is from a poor and uneducated family, she or he may have little chance to go to university and seek a job with better salary. Then, the person tends to marry the spouse with similar social background in the future. To break this unfavorable chain, how can we educators do for such people and society as a whole? What should we do?

Prof. Echols: One of the premier challenges of breaking cycles of dysfunction is getting people to realize their behaviors are dysfunctional. Most people believe the environment they are raised in is normal. At the very least it is normal to them. Another challenge is helping people who are in cycles of dysfunction develop the self-efficacy to believe they can change. I believe education has the potential to let people understand what is healthy and what isn't healthy or what is dysfunctional and what is not. Education can also be valuable in improving individual self-efficacy; however, the premier challenge of the educational system in the US has always been differences in resources between low-income and wealthier areas.

I believe educators have an obligation to identify the needs of the families they serve. When you are addressing the needs of low income and uneducated parents, a lack of resources is always a significant factor. Many parents cannot afford to take time off work to attend school functions, while others may not able to help their children with work because they do not understand it themselves. Schools should do a needs assessment of the community that they serve. They should not assume that parents don't care. It is important to find out the needs of families in order to help them give children a better chance at success.

－From your story and other similar stories everywhere in the world, I realized that there are so

many unloved children by their parents. As you mentioned, such parents usually have physical, mental, financial problems and/or serious personal issues. Of course, any children cannot live alone. In many cases, they will need foster care, educational opportunity, financial support, and etc. But, I guess some of such children may regard themselves as 'unnecessary people' because their biological parents do not love them at all. How do you encourage such children?

Prof. Echols: That is an excellent question! I believe the best way to encourage children who are faced with the challenges of a dysfunctional environment is to help them to understand that they are not their circumstance. What I mean by that is to help them understand their lives are not pre-destined. There have been many children in foster care, as well as children that have been through other challenging life situations who have become successful people. I share these stories and examples as ways to encourage them.

Fight Against Prejudice & Racism through Education

－We move on to another sensitive societal issue. Quite recently, there are very sad events in the US. White police officers unlawfully shot black men but the officers were not charged. As you know, there were demos and riots in major cities. In the US educational settings such as school and university (and personnel training in corporation), do you think that there is still discrimination based on race, sex, religion, and other societal and cultural factors? Please share your observation with us.

Prof. Echols: The US has obviously made progress in race relations since the Civil Rights struggle of the 1950s and 60s; however, there is still much work that needs to be done. Discrimination based on race, sex, and religion continues to be a scourge in US society and it is seen in schools and the work place. African American males in particular have struggled to overcome discrimination which can be seen in disparities in their educational attainment. A report from the National Black Male College Achievement Study found that only 47% of African American male high school students graduate within 4 years, in comparison to 78% of White male students who graduate from high school within 4 years. The differences in high school preparation is also found in African American students being less prepared for college level academic work than other groups. The percentage of African American males who entered college in 2002 (4.3%) was the same as it was 30 years earlier in 1976. In addition, only 33.3% of African American males finish their bachelor's degree within 6 years in comparison to 48.1% of students on average that graduate within 6 years.*

Of course there are critics who will argue the lack of educational attainment for African American males is due to their inability, not discrimination. It is my personal experience as an African American male who struggled with academics throughout elementary, middle, and high school that when you place low expectations on people they live down to them. This is true of individuals as well as groups of people. When teachers, counselors, and other institutions place low expectations on African American males, they don't aspire towards self-actualization. My journey from struggling through primary and secondary school to earning a Ph.D. was not because I suddenly became intelligent when I enrolled in college. I was successful in college because I started to believe I could be more than I initially thought, and wanted to achieve my full potential. I also had the support of family and some dedicated teachers who gave me encouragement when it was needed. The need to create positive outcomes for African American males was the basis of my study on resiliency development. Research has made it pretty clear that community support is essential to the well-being and positive development of African American males. Education remains one of the pillars of community support, so more work is needed to close gaps in educational attainment for African Americans and other minorities.

*Harper, S. R. (2012). Black male student success in higher education: A report from the National Black Male College Achievement Study. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education.

－From my own learning experience and working experiences, I can say that education has its power to both minimize and maximize human prejudice. For instance, when I was a Capella student I did not experience any sort of discrimination so much. A few faculty members looked at me in suspicious manners ('Who are you?' 'Where are you originally from?' 'Is English your native language?' etc). After finishing Capella, I used to live in Southeast Asia for three years as an educational consultant. But, I realized that there were still some people have animosity against Japan and Japanese about the events before World War I & II. They believe they are poor because Japan invaded their countries more than 70 years ago. As a matter of fact, the Japanese government completed compensation to Asian countries and still financially supports these countries through the Official Development Assistance (ODA) Program every year (in 2014, US$4,542 million to developing countries including Southeast Asia). From my own investigation, I realized that all of them did not know this fact at all. School teachers also do not teach this fact to their students so well. It looks like 'Repaying kindness with ingratitude.' Of course, there are many pro-Japanese people in Southeast Asia. My point is this: Education looks like a double-edged sword. What do you think of this? Do you have any similar experience?

Prof. Echols: I feel that education has the power to provide people with new understanding and perspective, but there will always be people who resist change. A limit of education is regardless of the quality, it is still restricted by environment. For instance in the example you gave, people who had probably not been outside of Southeast Asia may not have had any positive experiences with someone from Japan. As a result, they still harbored resentment and prejudice towards anyone who is Japanese. The same can be said in the US. Someone who is Caucasian and has not had the opportunity to have positive interactions with African Americans may continue to believe in racial stereotypes, even if they are educated. This probably true for an African American who never had the opportunity to have positive interactions with Caucasians.

As A New Scholar-Practitioner...

－ Finally, please tell us about your educational philosophy and future vision. From your learning experience and working experiences, how do you define 'a good educational leader' or 'a good leader in the educational setting'?

Prof. Echols: My educational philosophy is inspired from a personal journey as a student who struggled academically throughout elementary school, middle school, and high school, but eventually earned a PhD. For many minority and low-income students, relevancy is one of the key challenges of school. Minority and low-income students have been identified in numerous studies as having fewer financial resources, less rigorous academic preparation, and difficulties acclimating to college. These are among the challenges which prevent minority, low-income, and other types of non-traditional students from enrolling in college, and they continue to be barriers to these students remaining in college long enough to earn a degree. I was among the number of minority and low-income students that were challenged to discover how college could be relevant to daily life. I was able to commit to college by personalizing what was being taught in the classroom. College became an environment where I was able to excel, as I was given the opportunity to apply course lessons to areas of interest and importance in my life and community.

I believe that college is not only an environment where people can become self-actualizing, it is an opportunity for once struggling students to get a second chance at academic success. Because of my educational philosophy, I am a fierce supporter of community colleges and online education, which offer support and opportunities for the success of non-traditional students. I believe a good educational leader will seek to make classes relevant to students, and

an opportunity for them to learn skills which will allow them to realize their goals. A good educational leader will see themselves as a facilitator of knowledge. They will adapt their approach to match the diverse needs and abilities of students in the classroom. I believe this approach is essential in not only making classes relevant to students, but also giving each student their best chance at being successful.

－This is the last question. As a new scholar-practitioner, how do you want to motivate other people, especially people in very difficult situations? How do you want to change people and circumstance?

Prof. Echols: I believe I have been given a wonderful opportunity to continue working with children and families to improve their relationships, create more positive family functioning, develop better communication and understanding, and strengthen their overall well-being. I intend to continue in this work, and Lord willing the only thing that will change is the scale I am given to help families.

－Prof. Echols, thank you very much for your sharing precious time though you are very busy for your job and research. Thank you very much.

(Photo: By Courtesy of Dr. Mark Echols)

For your comments and inquiries, send your e-mail to

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