School Counselors and African American Students: Counseling within the Psychology of the Black Experience

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In the contemporary age of 'proposed culturally competent practices and pedagogy', issues in urban educational settings remain somewhat prevalent in today's K-12 learning environments. This paper provides auto-ethnographic perspectives and relevant literature to assist education professionals and stakeholders in promoting student success, academic achievement, and increasing access to higher education. In this article, the terms African American male and Black male are used interchangeably.

An article published by Grissom and Redding (2015) stated that in 2013 the U.S. Department of Education reported 16.7% of African American students made up the student population. Of those 16.7%, there were significantly less male students of color within the student body. These disparities have sparked concern among researchers as to how students of color are often misunderstood in the U.S. educational system. Education professionals who work with students of color must be familiar with their students' culture before they are able to fully understand student behaviors (Neville & Mobley, 2001). Neville and Mobley's (2001) assertion is important because there are higher rates of disciplinary referrals for African American and Latino students. This often results in minority students feeling as if they are less valued and being treated unfairly by school personnel. These perceptions are likely to negatively impact their academic achievement (Neville & Mobley, 2001). Mattering, adolescent development, deculturalization of education, academic, racial, and social inequities are explored to assist those interested in the upward social mobility of the Black and African American student, especially male, with expanding growth mindsets that are directly aimed at ensuring their success.

The Importance and Impact of School Settings

Owens, Simmons, Bryant, and Henfield (2011) suggest that the internalization of negative stereotypes can negatively impact the stress levels and academic performance of Black male students in the urban school setting. To explicate this fact, Steele (1992) found that African American children exposed to teachers who displayed sincere concern for their academic success demonstrated better cognitive outcomes. School counselors in the urban school setting play a pivotal role in helping students feel more empowered and engaged in curriculum that is not culturally tailored to fit their academic needs. The school setting plays a profound role on the psychological development of Black male students during adolescence. Schools that are in urban settings consist of many contextual characteristics that may contribute to increased adversity for Black male students (Lee, 2005). Urban schools face challenges such as high community crime and poverty, large complex educational systems, and minority health disparities. These societal inequities contribute to attrition, drop out, poor academic success, and a decreased preparation to navigate the social systems within the world (Ford & Moore, 2013). Adolescent Black male students are at risk for lower levels of academic, social, and personal development in the current school climate (Lee, 2005). As most urban territories are inhabited by members of community-

oriented cultures, a large percentage of Black male students will face many of these challenges that can negatively impact their rate of academic success and positive development (Lee, 2005).

Mattering and African American Male Students

Tucker, Dixon and Griddine (2010) define mattering as an experience of moving through life being noticed by others who matter to us. Mattering is an essential concept that is paramount to the success of urban students' academic outcomes and ultimately access to higher education. In creating cultures where mattering is at the forefront, Palmer and Maramba (2012) discuss the impact on creating supportive environments on school campuses. As the authors of this work, they theorized that as Black males transition in life, they worry if they will be able to comfortably transition into new roles and responsibilities, accompanied by a sense of belonging. Without this sense of belonging, task completion could decrease in efficacy (Palmer & Maramba, 2012). Within this concept of mattering, researchers have used this to assess the campus climate that involves students of color in education.

Equally, Tucker et al. (2010) research focused on the experiences of how African American males matter to others at schools in urban areas. As the authors of this work are high-achieving urban Black males who have matriculated through the rigors of higher education, the aim is to provide a real-lived perspective of what helps urban students, particularly Black males, survive and thrive in educational settings not always meant for them.

Adolescent Development

As African American males transition into adolescence they spend more time in school environments. In doing so, their developing identity is fragile (Cunningham, Swanson & Hayes 2013). Adolescent development is important within schools due to the impact that expectations of positive and negative teachers can have on these males equally. Cunningham, Swanson & Hayes (2013) stress how these two experiences shift the development of adolescent Black males and increase mattering. Adolescent development for youth consists of rapid intra- and interpersonal changes (Steinberg, 2008). The biological changes can influence how a teen learns, adapts, and socially engages. This period typically begins in middle school and extends into the high school years. The biological and psychological changes are heavily influenced by the socio-cultural factors that exist in the teens' environment. Adolescent development is the time that youth will begin to create the blueprint of who they envision themselves to be in the world and how capable they are to navigate life's challenges. This sensitive period of self-efficacy development is particularly important for males from marginalized cultures in a society.

Deculturalization

Deculturalization, the failure to acknowledge the presence or value of other cultures outside the dominant one in a societal group, has worked to reinforce mono-ethnic globalization and increase economic wealth of the dominant White culture. The historical deculturalization of people from African cultures in the United States resulted in generational loss of cultural identity including language, culture, and customs (Anderson, 1988). In addition to generational loss of cultural identity, Black male students face negative social stereotypes that can weaken the development of healthy self-esteem. The ultimate task should be for Black educators as well as other professionals to be committed to improving the outcomes of Black males in school environments (Warren, 2014). In 1865, after slavery, 126 schools were initiated by the Freedmen's Bureau to address educational disparities, however, they failed to aid African Americans in reaffirming racial equality and/or improving their economic prowess in a social zeitgeist determined to support a White monolithic status quo (Anderson, 1988). When we

examine the historical records of American culture, we find a tolerance for African Americans receiving an education if it supported the premise of racial intellectual inferiority and/or an enhanced predisposition for manual labor (Anderson, 1988). While deculturalization is more prominent when applied to the economic psyche, it is the ideological rationale that has proven to have an impact on the American K-12 educational system. Mainstream America (White American culture) continues to find the task of educating African American students, and in many cases, any student different from the dominant culture, as extremely daunting. Woodson (2010) purported the solution to inequitable education to be qualified African American or Caucasian teachers who truly wanted to teach for liberation purposes. Warren (2014) encourages educational authority, especially teachers, to encourage young Black males to be authentic, yet advocate for policy changes that humanize their learning experiences.

Academic, Racial, and Social Inequities

Many of the school systems in America disproportionately place large numbers of Black male students in special education and gifted programs (Owens, Simmons, Bryant, & Henfield, 2011). The racial inequities in academic opportunities are also evident in the socialization of students when socioeconomic status and wealth are the primary predictors. When examining beneficial returns brought on by affluence and advantage, White teenagers benefit more from the spoils of affluential living (neighbors, health outcomes, employment, etc.) than African American teenagers who live within the same socioeconomic status category (Becares, 2015). Becares' (2015) research supported the notion that if socioeconomic status was made to be a constant and equal variable across all ethnic categories, systems of racism and sexism will continue to have a direct effect on the academic outcome of minority students. In addition, research suggests that Black male students are suspended and expelled at higher rates than students from other marginalized or dominate cultures (Lee, 2005).

The academic and social inequities can have a damaging impact on the positive development of self-concept and self-esteem in adolescent males (Major, McCoy, Kaiser, & Quinton, 2003). Research on Black child development report that Black male students have higher self-esteem when not exposed to White prejudices (Chae, Powell, Nuru-Jeter, Smith-Bynum, Seaton, Forman, & Sellers, 2017). The negative impacts on the psychological development of self-esteem and self-concept during adolescence can present unique challenges in the school setting for Black male students (Wilson, 2003). Self-esteem can contribute to the underachievement of Black male students in the classroom (Ford & Moore, 2013).

Supporting Self-Esteem and Self-Concept to Empower Students

The disproportionate achievement gap among Black male students may suggest that the educational process, especially within urban school settings, may not adequately cultivate the developmental potential of Black male students (Ford & Moore, 2013). Intrinsic variables that contribute to self-perception, such as self-esteem and self-concept, play a major role in maximizing the potential of Black male students in the academic setting. School counselors in the urban school setting must create culturally meaningful programs and interventions that are designed to meet the academic and learning development of Black male students during adolescence in order to push for increasing Black student potential in academic settings (Grover, 2005). A study by Haynes, Comer, and Hamilton-Lee (1989) found that behavioral and school-adjustment problems were shown to be related to a negative self-concept, whereas positive self-concept or self-esteem were shown to support positive outcomes, such as academic achievement and school performance.

During adolescent development, it is vital that school counselors support positive trajectories of self-esteem and self-concept in the academic setting. It is important for educators and school counselors to adopt a holistic framework of empowerment in addressing the academic needs of young Black males, as self-esteem is not solely based on achievement (Wilson, 2003). School counselors can help to direct their counseling interventions at holistically improving the academic outcomes of Black male students within the urban school setting. Current school counselors must be prepared to integrate empowerment strategies into their system-wide and direct counseling interventions. The research suggests that most counselors are not adequately prepared to counsel Black male students in the urban school setting (Owens, Pernice-Duca, & Thomas, 2009). It is important for school counselors to effectively address the needs of students who may be adversely impacted by systemic racism and those who experience poor academic outcomes.

Previous research has largely investigated the factors that influence the academic success of Black male students in high schools (Howard, 2013). However, there is little examination into the factors that influence the academic success of Black male students across the transition from middle school to high school. This period of transition is a crucial period within adolescent development as the social roles within the school setting and in the home change drastically. This shift in social roles can have a major effect on the development of self-concept and self-esteem. Additionally, there is a lack of research that investigates the role of school counseling on the academic success of Black male students during this transition period of adolescence (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). Therefore, it is rather important to investigate the implications of school counseling for Black male students on academic success during the transition from high school to college.

Social Justice and Advocacy

For school counselors and helping professionals such as social workers, mental health professionals, and teachers alike, to be successful in working with urban students, it is imperative to shift away from the historical deficit-based approaches focused on the weaknesses of groups or individuals (Bemak & Chung, 2005). For optimal academic achievement, school counselors pursue socially just outcomes by infusing their school counseling program with the four themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. School counselors must implement and support programs that enhance the environments in which students function as well as implement comprehensive interventions that result in systemic change (Bemak & Chung, 2005). Those in leadership should lead from a social advocacy perspective. It is not enough to ask the glowing contemporary question, do Black lives matter? The human agency standpoint has to attend to each and every student individually, while making a collaborative effort to incorporate best practices in learning for students of all races, colors, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Ratts, Dekruyf, & Hayes, 2007). This effort has to remain intentional to foster positive change for all students to be given the tools, resources, and ultimate fairness in the quest for equality in education.

Consciousness Raising

Consciousness and self-awareness are paramount for school counselors, teachers, helping professionals, and teachers alike to possess in order to be accountable advocates for urban students. In the age of the highly touted construct of cultural competency, consciousness raising serves as an advocacy tactic for increasing educational personnel's understanding of the needs of diverse students (Singh, Urbana, Haston, & McMahan, 2010). It is safe to relay that initiating difficult dialogues for school counselors and change agents typically brings about discomfort in

discussing topics that will likely result in other school personnel feeling defensive. Students' upward social mobility matters most, therefore these discussions and conversations must be had. These conversations must go forth to consistently increase the progressive effort for systemic change because the optimal well-being of the student as a whole is what matters most.

Implications and Recommendations

The overarching theme of Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine's (2010) research proved that mattering to others in the home setting as well as the school arena was vital to the success of Black males in the K-12 educational setting. This success was not strictly relegated to academic achievement, but also important in the overall success of the student as a person. From a personal and autoethnographic perspective, my experiences as a high-achieving Black male throughout my lifespan have been the direct result of not only knowing that I mattered, but more importantly being shown that I mattered. Whether it was my mother and immediate family unit, or the myriad of teachers and education administrators who provided a safety net for me to land safely when I fell in terms of being a rebellious adolescent hailing from a one-parent home, I always knew that I mattered. Mattering from others is essential to educating and counseling within the Black experience. Again, I am a living benefactor of this newly found terminology of mattering in the academic and sociological literature. Counselors and educators alike must boldly accept that this concept is paramount to any and all of the work they will do with not only students of color, but to be successful throughout the tenure of their careers. One should be culturally and personally aware of the biases, preconceived notions, prejudices, and any other mitigating factors that would impede him or her from providing best practices to each and every child that stands in from of them. This is the first steppingstone to dispelling the prevalent phenomenon of cultural mistrust that students of color have, particularly in the educational arena. The extant literature possesses no paucity of the historical atrocities that have been hurled against and toward persons of color.

With this very prevalent reality in the back of our minds, we should all forever attend to the motto that each one, teach one, and reach one. Accountability to be moral and fair should always be to the forefront when interfacing with each and every student. Counseling within the Psychology of the Black experience invites that one should not be fearful of asking the hard questions and being open and active in initiating difficult dialogues. If we do so, we will all continue to break down the multitude of barriers that students of color continue to face in today's society. We are all a vital part of the process.

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