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Urban African American Males' Perceptions of School Counseling Services

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Abstract

Using a qualitative framework, researchers explored urban African American male students' perceptions of their school counselors and the ways to improve school counseling services. While participants reported positive feelings toward their school counselors, they identified specific services school counselors can offer them to optimize academic and personal/social performance. The authors discuss the findings' implications on urban school counseling service delivery.

Keywords

urban school counseling, African American male

Urban African American male students face many obstacles, which include disproportionate placement in special education or remedial reading courses; higher rates of suspensions and expulsions than other race males; underrepresentation in gifted or advanced courses; and educational experiences that

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generally have derailed dreams (Kincheloe, 2007; Polite & Davis, 1999; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Moreover, private educational corporation's takeover of "failing" urban schools renders teacher unions and community members powerless in decision making for urban school districts (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 2005). Often, this type of intervention forces schools to implement programs designed to enhance the quality of education with very little regard for culture and how it shapes the lives of students (Kozol, 2005).

Historically, urban African American males have been viewed with "some degree of dissonance and trepidation by the larger society" (Spencer, 2001, p. 103). Schools, as microcosms of the larger society, can reflect this trepidation and consequently fail to assess how policies and pedagogy may not support positive academic outcomes for African American male students (Cooper, 2003; Rist, 2000; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). For example, Duncan and Jackson (2007) indicated that societal views may lead some African American males to adopt negative perceptions and stereotypes as normative, thereby shaping school and learning behaviors. Steele (2003) suggested that some African American male students internalize negative stereotypes depicting them as academically incapable, lazy, or uninterested. The internalization of these negative stereotypes, and the stress related to attempts to dispel them, otherwise known as stereotype threat, may lead some students to perform less well, academically (Jones, 2000; Pyke & Dang, 2003; Steele, 2003).

Livingston and Nahimana (2006) questioned whether the educational problems faced by urban African American males relate solely to intraindividual variables such as lack of motivation or disinterest in school. Instead, they suggested that a confluence of intraindividual variables (e.g., self-concept or personal goals), school culture, and community issues (e.g., unemployment and access to quality living conditions) contour African American males' school perceptions. Livingston and Nahimana's approach signaled a paradigm shift that explores multiple variables related to African American male students' school experiences.

Other research has explored promoting African American males' academic success through systemic school change. Furlow, McMahon, and Uwah (2008) found that encouraging African American males' educational aspirations is a significantly positive predictor of healthy academic self-efficacy. Milner (2007), posited that "empowered" teaching helps African American males (a) visualize their lives beyond current circumstances; (b) understand themselves in "relation to others"; (c) "speak possibility" rather than "destruction"; (d) demonstrate care and concern; and (e) engage

in changed thinking to demonstrate changed behavior (p. 1). Empowered students can become independent learners and reach their full intellectual potential (Suleiman, 1998). However, Axelman's (2006) qualitative research with African American males found "a tension that exists between the implementation of safe-school policies and African American development" (p. 43). Residing and attending school in high-risk urban neighborhoods may compromise students' attention to academic achievement. Potentially negative experiences African American males commonly confront in such environments could cause academic disengagement (Polite & Davis, 1999). School counselors can mediate the risks African American males face by developing a school counseling program that offers responsive services that support academic and personal/social development (House & Sears, 2002). However, the school counseling literature lacks school counselor-initiated strategies that target urban African American males' school success.

School Counselors and Urban Schools

The scholarly literature has given little attention to overcoming the challenges associated with urban school counseling (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005); however, there is increasing interest in the topic (Green, Conley, & Barnett, 2005). For example, Holcomb-McCoy and Mitchell (2005) indicated that urban school counselors are expected to engage in many noncounseling activities including administrative and registrar duties. Similarly, Gysbers and Henderson (1994) observed that school counselors may administer tests, cover classes for absent teachers, and supervise lunch rooms and study halls. Such responsibilities limit school counselors' time to assist students in meeting important milestones.

Moreover, urban school counselors are likely to encounter schools with low academic achievement and family functioning, and housed in poor communities (Lee, 2005). Lee also asserted that school counselor effectiveness is often impeded by family instability, student transience, school violence, and student absenteeism. Providing urban school counseling to African American males necessitates understanding their perspectives of school counselors and perceived counseling needs.

Purpose of Research

Although the literature highlights difficulties urban African American males may encounter in and out of school, it offers little guidance to urban school

counselors in meeting these students' needs. This study explored urban African American males' perceptions of school counselors and the quality of school counseling services that can be used by school counselors to create culturally meaningful interventions designed to meet their needs.

Method

Participants

The lead researcher, a counselor educator at a midwestern university, collaborated with the local school district to place fieldwork students and provide professional development. To solicit participants, she sought assistance from a local urban high school administrator and school counselor. Potential participants received documents that described the study to them and their parents. The lead researcher visited the school to meet with 30 potential participants identified by the administrator and counselor. Ten volunteers returned signed parental consent forms and agreed to participate.

Participants ranged in age from 14 to 17; the mean participant age was 16 years ($M = 16$). The median grade level was 11th grade and the median grade point average was 2.7 (4.0 scale). Eight students resided in single parent, female-headed households; two reported living with grandparents. At data collection, 70% of district students qualified for free/reduced lunch. Located in one of the poorest cities in America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007), the school district's racial demographics include African American (82.70%), White (12.26%), Asian (0.97%), Native American (0.33%), Pacific Islander (0.3%), Other races (2.54%), and multiracial (2.32%) students. Approximately 1,769 students (920 boys and 849 girls) attend the school, which has a student–teacher ratio of 24:1 and a student–counselor ratio of 1:450. All counselors were African American females and ranged in age from 38 to 55 years.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, the research team secured approval from the Human Subject Review Committee of the lead researcher's institution and obtained written parental permission. The researchers used Moore's (2005) 14-item open-ended questionnaire which elucidates participants' attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of their school counselors. Sample questions include, "In what ways can school counseling services be improved for African

American males?" "What are your perceptions and experiences with your professional school counselor?" Each participant completed one 50-min interview in a private office located in the participants' high school and received no compensation. The researchers collected no identifying information from the participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996). IPA explores how participants make meaning from lived experiences and focuses on individuals' uniqueness of thoughts and perceptions. The research team included the authors and an independent data evaluator. Using IPA, the research team reviewed audiotapes several times to identify recurring themes and language that communicated participants' experiences with school counselors. The researchers listened for vernacular terms that might be easily overlooked if one lacked familiarity with this group's cultural norms. Once interview text was transcribed, team members reviewed participant responses twice for underlying meaning and messages in participants' responses. We reviewed the text for contrasts and comparisons in wording (Babbie, 2004; Blaikie, 2003). The team generated a comprehensive list of master themes and discussed them in several meetings.

Trustworthiness

Multiple methods were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. One such method, investigator triangulation, "occurs when the different knowledge and expertise" of the research team are used to analyze research data. Triangulation seeks to "reduce the potential bias that occurs when only a single investigator is used" (Stuart, 2003, p. 82). Moreover, using multiple researchers allows dynamic theme and subtheme examination (Denzin, 1978). Using multiple researchers to review the qualitative data and theme identification facilitates identification of different participant perspectives. Thus, the research team employed member checks (comparing themes in data) to compare interpretation of findings (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The researchers carefully considered and discussed how personal biases and possible influence of within-group similarities and differences shaped theme identification. An independent evaluator reviewed the data and the team's themes for biases and baseless conclusions. Once the team and evaluator agreed on common themes or threads in the data, comprehensive themes were selected.

Findings

Data analysis yielded three primary themes: (a) positive experiences and regard toward school counselors; (b) academic support needed to navigate the educational process; and (c) suggestions for improving school counseling services. Each theme will be illustrated by examples using direct quotes from participants.

Theme One: Engaged Counselors Support the Learning Process

Participants (9 out of 10) expressed positive perceptions of their professional school counselors. One participant stated,

> My school counselor has really helped me with every aspect of school-related business. Sometimes the other students don't see how hard she works. She has filled out necessary information on my college applications, informed me about meetings that were helpful in my college decision making. She has done everything that I need her to do for me.

Another participant stated, "She is really cool; it is just that I have not had a real good conversation with her yet, but it will come, I can talk to her about everything." Another stated, "Our school counselor really looks out for us, anything that we need we just ask and she'll make sure that we get it." In speaking about one school counselor, another participant stated, "She is very helpful up to a certain point but she is like if you are not trying to help yourself she does not care."

The participants' positive perceptions suggest that African American male students who perceive school counselors as engaged view the counselors as a support system and resource for navigating school. This finding is consistent with expectations of the American School Counselor Association's National Model (ASCA; 2005), which encourages school counselors to spend at least 80% of their time in direct counseling, prevention, and intervention services with students.

Theme Two: Urban African American Males Desire Targeted Academic Support

Another common theme was participants' perception that counselors do not offer targeted academic support. One participant felt like he simply needed

more academic information: "I need more information on study skills and stuff because sometimes these classes can be a lot." Another stated, "I can pretty much do my own college applications but I need more information about scholarships and how to study." Another stated, "Teachers don't realize that six classes is a lot of work. I still need to figure out how to manage them and study for all of them. Sometimes, I have like three test in one day." Another stated,

> I just wish we had more tutoring services in the building. My classes are all full, and, at the beginning of the year some of us didn't even have a desk. The teacher does not have time to keep going over stuff with so many students.

Overall, the students had positive perceptions of school counselors but lacked direction on how to choose classes and prepare for their futures. Another student stated,

> Study skills are where I need help, but I find it hard to study if you do not have a book. In my English class at the beginning of the year we had 40 students, there were not even enough seats. I did not have a book, so I could not study. It would have helped if I had the right tools.

Another stated, "I think school counselors need to help us understand how to stay organized." The students' perceptions indicate that regard for the counselor is not synonymous with implementation of a school counseling program that systematically delivers responsive services that improve academic achievement.

Theme Three: Improving School Counseling Services Includes Increased Direct Service

Participants offered recommendations for improving school counseling services. One recurring consideration offered was, simply, the need for more school counselors. One participated stated, "Honestly, there needs to be more school counselors in this building because there is not enough." Another stated, "I really have not had the opportunity to have a real conversation with my counselors yet; she's cool but busy." Another stated,

> The truth is that we don't have enough school counselors for all of us. We also need to have at least one male in building. All of our school counselors are women. It would be cool if every student could get in

to speak with the school counselor if they needed to. We have to wait until she is available and sometimes we need to get something done that day.

Consistent with the participants' perception that students need more school counselors was the desire for counselors to assist them with addressing non-academic problems. "I mean I know this is a school but we face a lot of violence in this school. A lot of fighting goes on and pressure to fit into the crowd. I think we need like some male counselors and just some more counselors to help us cope with peer pressure and fighting," stated one participant. Another stated,

School counselors have to understand what is going on at home because a lot of us have problems going on at home and they just comes to school with us. School counselors need to understand our home life. Most of us know people that have been killed due to violence and some of us have a lot family stuff going on. It would be cool if school counselors understood that we have more to think about than just school.

Having access to counselors and a program that assists in managing various challenges seemed important to participants.

Limitations

The study's participants demonstrate persistence in school, which may be related to motivation, academic ability, school support, and family variables. Participants' perceptions of school counselors provide glimpses into their repertoire of strategies to stay in school. The participants may have positive feelings toward their school counselors, because their counselors are African American women, and the positive perceptions of the school counselors may be related to the positive relationships experienced with their mothers. Results may display both transference and counter transference in the counseling relationship given that the research team was comprised of African American males and females (Brown & Davis, 2000).

Additional insight could be gained by collecting data from urban African American male students who have dropped out or those enrolled in various curricula such as special education, college preparatory, dual enrollment, or vocational training. A previous research study found that African American males enrolled in special education classes reported negative experiences

with their school counselors (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). Diversifying the sample provides another context for understanding this study's results. The researchers used a limited convenience sample but would have preferred to randomly select potential participants who represented different variables such as grade level or courses of study. We acknowledge that if random selection had been employed, results may have been different.

Subtleties in body language and vocal inflections presented during data collection cannot be accounted for fully by review of written transcripts. Another probable limitation relates to the use of written transcripts to analyze data. Future studies could include videotaped interviews and use of tapes during analysis.

Discussion

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of urban African American male students with their professional school counselors. The students seemed to have positive perceptions of their school counselors, despite limited contact and a perceived gap in services. Specifically, the participants identified the need for regular academic support synonymous with delivery system activities outlined by the American School Counselor Association's National Model (ASCA, 2005). For example, participants noted that they needed to learn study skills; assistance with managing the demands of school work; collaboration on educational planning; demystification of curriculum and course sequencing; and learning support given classroom overcrowding and teachers' role overload. The participants' interest in acquiring academic skills indicates positive regard for education, despite the multiple challenges faced at school and in the community. Participants identified strategies which they deemed critical to academic success which is significant given the literature's pervasive description of urban African American males as disengaged from schooling.

The participants also reported that, although school counselors are helpful, limited numbers of counselors resulted in students' needs being unidentified and unmet. Furthermore, some of the participants stated that having a male counselor would be helpful in learning safety strategies in the midst of school violence and defusing negative peer pressure. The participants seemed to have fairly accurate expectations of appropriate school counselor duties and roles despite the role strain of high school counselors.

These findings suggest a need for culturally relevant school counseling that supports the academic and personal/social development of urban African American males. Implicit in participants' responses was the need for

academic support; the presence of male counselors; and support in managing violence and negative peer pressure. To meet these needs, urban school counselors not only need to understand cultural nuances but also need to demonstrate gender and cultural competence (Arredondo et al., 1996). Urban school counselors' awareness of personal cultural values and biases toward African American male students; understanding of personal cultural heritage and the social impact on African Americans; and pursuit of learning opportunities about African American males along multiple domains will support empathetic understanding of these students' worldviews.

Often, urban school counselors are overwhelmed by large caseloads and commitment to noncounseling clerical duties (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005). Thus, urban school counselors must be creative in addressing the needs of urban African American males. State counseling associations and university school counseling partnerships can provide extra support to counselors. Programs offered by 100 Black men, Greek letter organizations, and peer counseling can provide tutoring and role modeling that support urban African American males' academic success. Finally, educational leaders, such as superintendents, counseling supervisors, and principals, could benefit from training on appropriate roles for school counselors that improve educational outcomes for urban African American males.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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