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African American Males in Special Education

Their Attitudes and Perceptions Toward High School Counselors and School Counseling Services

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Drawing on a larger study, this article is based on the findings of individual interviews and biographical questionnaires conducted with 10 African American males in special education. These students attended two low-performing, urban high schools located in the midwestern part of the United States. Using critical race theory as the theoretical framework, this article focuses on these students’ perceptions of school counselors and their attitudes toward school counseling services. Implications, based on the findings, are given to school counselors.

**Keywords:** African Americans; males; school counseling; special education

In many places around the country, public school systems are failing miserably with African American male students. Many of these students are not succeeding in school and are frequently seen as a population at-risk (Bailey, 2003; Bailey & Moore, 2004; Farmer et al., 2004; Jackson & Moore, 2006; S. E. Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Moore, 2003). Throughout the educational pipeline (i.e., elementary, secondary, and postsecondary), African American males lag behind their Caucasian counterparts academically, as well as their African American female counterparts (Jackson & Moore, 2006; J. L. Moore, Flowers, Guion, Zhang, & Staten, 2004;...

This educational trend is certainly evident in urban school systems (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Council of Great City Schools, 1999) and is also apparent in high-income suburban communities, where educators and the general public often do not expect to discover this educational pattern (Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003; Ferguson, 2002; McGuire, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Ogbu, 2003). Thus, African American males in some public school systems do better than African American males in other school systems (College Board, 2005; Holzman, 2006; Ogbu, 2003). For example, African American males in Shaker Heights, an affluent suburb near Cleveland, academically outperformed African American males in other parts of Ohio; however, in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts in the same Shaker Heights school district, the African American males’ academic performance lagged significantly (Ogbu, 2003). This educational pattern was also found among the African American females.

Disproportionality of African American Males in Special Education

In the nation’s public schools, demographic variables, such as race, gender, and class, remain significant in the United States (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Kea & Utley, 1998). The individuals most likely to be placed in special education are Black, male, and poor (Harry, Klinger, & Moore, 2000). More specifically, African American males are the student group more likely to be identified and classified for special education services (Holzman, 2006; Noguera, 2005). In many of these school systems, special education seems to be the preferred educational intervention or curriculum for students who are African American males. It is, therefore, plausible that special education is stratified by racial, gender, and socioeconomic classifications (Cooper, 1996; Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Noguera, 2005). It is also reasonable to believe that these demographic variables negatively influence the school outcomes of African American male students (Noguera, 2005), thereby contributing to their overrepresentation in special education (Davis, 2005; Noguera, 2005; J. M. Patton, 1998).

African Americans, in general, are identified for special education at disproportionate rates in urban school settings (Gottlieb, Atler, Gottlieb, & Wishner, 1994). Thus, the numbers are equally pronounced in rural and suburban school settings (Holzman, 2006). Nationally, it is estimated that nearly 20,000 African American male students are inappropriately classified as mentally retarded. This estimation represents a 300% overclassification of this student population (Holzman, 2006). Once identified, students of color, such as African American males, are more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to be placed in restrictive classroom settings.
(Fierros & Conroy, 2002; J. M. Patton, 1998). In many cases, scores below 70-75 on IQ tests categorize students as mentally retarded and make them eligible for special education services (Holzman, 2006). Furthermore, African American males are frequently identified as seriously emotionally disturbed. African Americans as a group are twice as likely to be diagnosed with this label (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002). These figures are even more striking when taking into consideration that African Americans only constitute 17% of the student population nationally (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Too many African American males are placed in special education programs in comparison to their national representation found in public schools in general.

**Post-Brown v. Board of Education:**

**Issues of Discrimination and Civil Rights**

More than 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), it is unfortunate that African American males continue to experience educational inequalities and inconsistencies in public school systems all around the country. Educational gaps remain disturbing, persistent, and significant. Surprising as it may seem in 2006, the nation has failed to remedy permanently the educational disparities found among different racial, gender, and socioeconomic student populations. Because African American males are disproportionately placed in special education, it is understandable that there is a heightened interest in this topic. In popular and scientific literature, there is no shortage of attention or coverage of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006; Green, 2005; Noguera, 2005; J. M. Patton, 1998) and their underrepresentation in programs for the gifted and talented (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ford, 1996, 1998; J. L. Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005a, 2005b; J. L. Moore et al., 2006). Dunn (1968) suggests that this attention has persisted for nearly 40 years. Other scholars, such as J. M. Patton (1998) and Willie, Garibaldi, and Reed (1991), emphasize that the overrepresentation problem in special education has deep roots, dating back to slavery. Regardless of its origins, it is clear that the issue of overrepresentation of students of color in special education continues to be recognized at both the national and state levels (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006).

Data disaggregated by race, gender, and class continue to reveal a compelling story about African American male students. The data consistently raise questions about racial discrimination and violations of students’ civil rights (J. M. Patton, 1998) and frequently suggest educational malpractice due to overrepresentation of African American males in special education and their underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Holzman, 2004, 2006). These questions are not new. In fact, they have been around for a long time, dating back to the *Brown* decision. It is, therefore, understandable that the issue of overrepresentation...
of African American males in special education and their underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs are sensitive topics—and discussions of major concern.

Given the cultural and economic advantages that many African Americans now enjoy in American society, the African American community cannot help but be bothered by these alarming educational patterns for African American males. The consequences are deleterious to not only African American males but also the community at large. African American males often miss meaningful educational and social experiences in general education curricula (Davis, 2005; J. M. Patton, 1998), particularly those students who are erroneously placed in restrictive special education classrooms. Hence, these students are more prone to experience lower levels of achievement and limited postsecondary and employment opportunities (Markowitz, Garcia, & Eichelberger, 1997; J. M. Patton, 1998).

Amending the disproportionate representation of African American males in special education is not a simple task. Thus, it is clear that special education is in a precarious position regarding African American males. It is necessary that educators, policy makers, and researchers expand their understanding of the factors—school, psychological, social, and cultural—that make African American males susceptible to being diagnosed, classified, and placed in special education. It also important that these individuals work, individually and collectively, to change or revise policies, programs, processes, and practices that negatively contribute to these factors.

Rationale for Utilizing School Counselors

School counselors are, arguably, in the best position to assist African American males in special education, as well as advocate on behalf of these students. They are among the few educational professionals in the school building who are trained to create and manage programs that enhance academic achievement, career development, and personal–social growth of students (Martin, 2002; J. L. Moore, 2006; Sears, 2002). In the broadest sense, school counselors develop programs and deliver services that meet the concerns of the school and, more important, address the needs of the students (Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003; Martin, 2002; J. L. Moore, 2006; Sears, 2002).

To achieve such objectives, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends that school counselors (a) coordinate comprehensive guidance programs for students; (b) advocate for all students; (c) call attention to those factors in the school system that enhance or hinder students’ school outcomes; (d) utilize school data (i.e., test scores, course placements, etc.) to identify patterns and behaviors that promote school success for all students and (e) act as leaders or change agents by identifying the barriers that impede school success of students and help develop change strategies for the benefit of each and every student (Colbert & Colbert, 2003). Unfortunately, in the research literature, it is well documented that public schools in America are falling short in meeting the academic and nonacademic needs of students (Ford, 1996, 1998; Ford & Moore, 2005; J. L. Moore et al., 2005a, 2005b), especially
students with special education needs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; J. M. Patton & Townsend, 1997). It is also well chronicled that school counselors are not carrying their weight on these matters (House & Sears, 2002; Martin, 2002; Sears, 2002). African American males and other students of color are falling between the cracks. They are more likely to attend schools with fewer educational resources (i.e., textbooks and laboratory equipment), and they are more likely to be educated by the least trained educators—teachers, school counselors, and administrators (Ford & Moore, 2004; Sears, 2002) A close examination of educational practices in public schools, including school counseling, reveals startling news. Over the years, a variety of reasons has been given to explain why school counselors are not functioning optimally with students and their pressing needs. As an example, Walz (1997, cited by House & Sears, 2002) asserts,

The answer to this question is complex. Current school counselor behavior results from inadequate preservice training, conflicting roles, administrators who fail to utilize counselors’ skills, pliable and overly accommodating counselor behavior, limited professional development opportunities, and overt and covert pressures from community, and parental special interest groups. (p. 155)

Regardless of the reasons, it is clear that school counselors are in the best position to improve the educational plight of African American males in special education. Aligned with this notion, Martin (2002) states,

With a school-wide perspective, school counselors are in the best position to assess the school for systemic and other barriers that impede academic success for all students. Issues of equity, access, and supporting conditions for success come to rest at the counselor’s desk in the form of data about student achievement, community conditions, and reports of school failure. Thus, school counselors who have served as record keepers of student data in schools are ideally positioned to use this data to advocate for traditionally underserved students. (p. 149)

The author further suggests that school counselors play a major role in making decisions about students’ academic placements and hold critical keys to students’ career futures. However, unfortunately, many school counselors are not prepared to provide this kind of leadership due to poor school counseling training and major constraints from school administrators (Martin, 2002).

**Reasons for the Study**

In many school systems around the country, African American male students face an array of social and academic problems that often inhibit their school outcomes. It is quite likely that these problems contribute to their disproportionate representation in special education. In general, African American males share many of the concerns—peer pressures, poor peer relationships, heightened sensitivity and
awareness of societal problems, and so forth—that special education students possess (Ford, 1994, 1998). However, the major difference between African American male students and their Caucasian counterparts is that they must contend with educational environments tainted by biases, stereotypes, and discrimination (J. L. Moore, 2000, 2001; S. E. Moore et al., 2003).

In such learning environments, African American students frequently lack personal connections with school counselors, or their experiences with school counselors are often negative (J. L. Moore et al., 2004) and/or limited (Henfield, 2006; J. L. Moore, 2006). In a recent study with middle and high school students, Ogwu (2003) found that many African American students perceived the school counselor as a gatekeeper for keeping them out of advanced courses and curricula (i.e., honors and advanced placement classes). He also found that these students felt the school counselors did not encourage as they did the Caucasian students. Furthermore, the study also revealed that teachers, not the school counselors, were most influential in encouraging African American students to strive for academic excellence.

Ogwu’s (2003) study indirectly relates to this study; however, his research presented several limitations. First, the study failed to focus specifically on African American high school students’ perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with school counselors. Instead, the study focused on both African American middle and high school. Second, the Ogwu study neglected to provide implications for improving the delivery of school counseling services for African American high school students in general and African American males enrolled in special education in particular. This research investigation, unlike the Ogwu study, examines how African American male students in special education perceive, utilize, and interact with their school counselors.

In the scientific literature, little research exists from the perspective of African American males in special education. There has been even less attention given to their perceptions of school counselors and their attitudes toward school counseling services. Because African American males are overrepresented in special education and school counselors are seen as the educational professionals in the best position in schools to identify the factors that contribute to these students’ overrepresentation in special education, it is important to understand how certain practices and attitudes contribute to students’ perceptions of school counselors.

With such information, school counselors can better serve African American males in special education, as well as help other educational professionals (i.e., teachers, administrators, etc.) better assist this student group. Furthermore, this study provides a basis for understanding the factors—school, psychological, social, and cultural—that both inhibit and promote the utility of school counseling for African American males in special education. With this in mind, the overall intent of this study is to investigate two broad research questions: (a) How do African American male students enrolled in special education perceive school counselors and the different services that they provide? and (b) To what degree are African American males enrolled in special education willing to utilize or partake in school counseling services?
Methodological Approach

Theoretical Framework

The voices of African American males in special education are rarely heard in popular and scientific literature. Regarding their perceptions of school counselors and attitudes toward school counseling services, they are heard even less. Critical race theory (CRT) is utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. Essentially, it contends that race and the meanings attached to race are socially constructed and cannot be ignored as a powerful aspect of human social life (Berry, 2005; Delgado, 1995; Henfield, 2006). Using CRT as a framework allowed the students to voice their concerns, particularly those related to race and race relations, on matters related to school counselors and the services they offer to students. Toward this end, Berry (2005) states, “Critical race theory acknowledges that their voices are legitimate and provides a forum in which their voices can be heard” (p. 47).

This theoretical approach has been found useful for theorizing and examining the ways in which race and the meanings attached to race influence the educational context for students of color (Henfield, 2006; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). It is commonly used in research on matters related to education—school discipline, curriculum, and assessments (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Furthermore, critical race theorists use storytelling or personal narratives to “analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv).

A belief in human agency is a basic epistemological supposition of critical race theorists (Henfield, 2006). “People have the ability to shape their own world; although their lives are shaped by the circumstances they inherit (i.e., race), they have the ability to act” (p. 61). Because theoretical perspectives should represent an extension of epistemological suppositions (Crotty, 1998), it is justifiable to use CRT as a theoretical framework.

Participants

This study is part of a larger investigation involving a purposeful sample of 10 African American males in special education (i.e., 9 seniors and 1 junior). The larger study was conducted in two low-performing, urban high schools located in the midwestern part of the United States. The African American male participants ranged from 17 to 18, with a mean age of 18 years old. Seven of the 10 students indicated that they had a grade point average (GPA) between 2.25 and 2.74. Three other participants indicated that they had a GPA between 2.75 and 3.24, and one indicated that he had a GPA less than 2.25.

During the time of the study, 80% of the African American male participants were receiving free or reduced-price lunch, and 60% of them lived in single-parent
households. Toward this end, most of the student participants had at least one parent or guardian with minimally a high school diploma. However, only 40% of the African American male participants lived in two-parent households. Despite being Black, male, poor, and in special education, most of the participants planned to pursue a postsecondary education after high school graduation, ranging from 2-year college or 4-year college to trade school.

**Data Collecting Protocols**

*Biographical questionnaires.* Two research assistants administered the biographical questionnaires to the African American male participants. Each research assistant was assigned to different high schools. The biographical questionnaires obtained the following data from student participants: (a) racial and gender background, (b) high school GPA, (c) mother and father educational history, (d) family living arrangement, and (e) educational/career goals. Such biographical questionnaires rendered important descriptive data that complemented the study.

*Individual interviews.* Individual interviews were the primary methods of inquiry. They were scheduled and conducted by the two research assistants. The individual interviews allowed the researchers to gain access to the many different forms of exchanges that the African American male participants employ in their routine interactions with others (J. L. Moore, 2006). Toward this end, the individual interviews enabled the African American male participants to conceptualize their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences in their own words (S. E. Moore et al., 2003; M. Q. Patton, 2002) while giving the researchers the ability to develop a complete view of the participants (J. L. Moore, 2006; S. E. Moore et al., 2003; Spradley, 1979).

Using the school counseling and special education literature, semistructured, open-ended questions were formulated to create the individual interviewing guide. With this approach, the questions may be added or subtracted depending on the responses of the participants before, after, or during the individual interview, thus allowing the researchers to take into account the emergent, constantly changing nature of qualitative research (M. Q. Patton, 2002). For this study, special emphasis was placed on the open-ended questions that focused on the two previously mentioned research questions.

**Data Collecting Procedures**

At both high schools, the two research assistants arranged face-to-face interviews with African American male students who agreed to participate in the study. Each individual interview was conducted by one of the two research assistants in a private designated space (i.e., school classroom or office). Before conducting the interviews, the African American male participants were first asked to complete a biographical
questionnaire. Completing the biographical questionnaire, along with the individual interview, ranged from 30 to 60 min. In addition, each individual interview was audiotaped and transcribed.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

After transcribing the audiotapes, a data analysis team was assembled, comprising the three researchers of this study. They all had a lot of experience conducting research investigations on African American students (e.g., Flowers et al., 2003; Flowers, Zhang, Moore, & Flowers, 2004; Henfield, 2006; J. L. Moore, 2006; S. E. Moore et al., 2003; J. L. Moore et al., 2006). The three researchers also had a great deal of experience conceptualizing, collecting, analyzing, and writing up qualitative studies (e.g., Flowers et al., 2004; Henfield, 2006; J. L. Moore, 2006; S. E. Moore et al., 2003; J. L. Moore et al., 2004).

For this study, the transcripts were analyzed using the three-step sequential coding process (J. L. Moore & Flowers, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). This technique is commonly referred to as the constant comparative analysis or grounded theory approach. It begins with the identification of themes emerging from the individual interview data, which develops into an indexing system, a process otherwise known as “open coding” (M. Q. Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). During open coding, the researchers identified and tentatively named the conceptual categories into which the observed phenomena were grouped. The goal was to create descriptive, multidimensional categories that form a preliminary framework for the analyses. Words, phrases, and events that appeared to be similar were grouped into similar categories, otherwise known as open codes. These open codes were gradually modified or replaced during the subsequent stages of analysis that follow.

The purpose of coding was not only to describe but also, more important, to acquire new understanding of the phenomenon of interest. The next stage of coding analysis was axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), which involved reexamining the previously identified open codes to determine how they are linked. In other words, axial coding was the process of taking broad open codes and comparing and combining them in new, more streamlined explanations of the phenomenon in question (Henfield, 2006). During axial coding, researchers build a conceptual model and for determining whether sufficient data exist to support that interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). However, this process is not linear.

During axial coding, researchers may determine that the initial categories identified should be revised, leading to reexamination of the raw data. Additional data collection may occur at any point if researchers uncover gaps in the data. Ideally, the research data are rich, a tightly woven account that “closely approximates the reality it represents” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 57). To summarize the data analysis process, open coding was the initial step, in which interview data were broken down into more manageable categories according to information gleaned from the
individual interviews. This process of open coding of the interviews continued until all of the individual interviews were collected. At that point, the process of axial coding began with the members of the research team (i.e., the three researchers). By combining open codes into similar categories, or axial coding, themes began to emerge from the data. Once themes emerged, the researchers utilized the member-checking process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to confirm the findings; however, none of the African American male participants had anything to add or change.

**Authenticity and Trustworthiness of the Data**

In essence, authenticity is the attempt to synchronize the goals of the researcher with the needs of the people being researched (Spradley, 1979). To balance participants’ needs with the needs of the researchers, openness and honesty was tantamount. Furthermore, the African American male participants were informed that the main reason for the study was to find out more about their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with school counselors and school counseling programs. The participants were also told that such information would help improve school counseling services for other African American males in special education. To this end, the participants were keenly aware of the importance of this study, as well as the significance of their participation.

Qualitative research provides a window of understanding into the lives of people. It is essentially used to increase multicultural understanding. However, the extent to which data are accurately interpreted is a fundamental tension in critical theory–informed qualitative research (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). If precautions are not taken to enhance accurate interpretation and representation of people’s stories, those being studied can easily be exploited in the name of scientific inquiry (Spradley, 1979).

To avoid “othering” participants, collaborative relationships were formed with the participants of the study. In addition, because a good qualitative researcher first and foremost tries to understand participants’ rationale for doing the things they do (Ladson-Billings, 2000), numerous member checks were conducted with participants from the time of first contact until the end of the study (Glesne, 1999). The researchers’ goal was to assume the role of a learner and to view the study through the eyes of a child whose function is to seek knowledge and grow (Zaharlick, 1992).

**Findings**

Based on the data analysis, three themes were identified related to the African American male participants’ perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with school counselors and their school counseling services. These themes indicated that the African American male participants in special education had both positive and
negative perceptions and comfort levels with school counselors. The findings also indicated that the students had many expectations and experiences with their school counselors, but they were oftentimes not fulfilled. Along these lines, the three themes can be categorized according to: (a) the perceived role of the school counselor; (b) the actual experiences with the school counselor; and (c) the comfort level with the school counselor.

Direct excerpts from the transcripts are used to illustrate the three major themes. For each theme, no African American male participant is quoted more than once. This practice was used to ensure representativeness. Below is a discussion of the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Such findings are drawn from qualitative data of the larger study.

Perceived Role of the School Counselor

The relationship between African American students and educators has received considerable attention in the research literature (Ferguson, 1998; Howard, 2003; J. L. Moore et al., 2005b; S. E. Moore et al., 2003). In schools, students often construct their perceptions and attitudes toward learning and those who educate them (i.e., teachers, school counselors, and administrators) through their social interactions, relationships, and experiences with educators (Ferguson, 1998; Flowers et al., 2004; J. L. Moore, 2006). Toward this end, many educational researchers believe that educators play a critical role in students’ educational outcomes and influence the overall quality of experiences that students have in schools (Howard, 2003; J. L. Moore, 2006; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997).

Using a nationally representative sample, Flowers et al. (2003) found that African American students’ perceptions of their high school teachers’ expectations of their educational future had a significant impact on these students’ educational aspirations. Along this line, it was clear, in this study, that perceptions among the African American male participants were held about school counselors. Many of these perceptions were related to the expected role of the school counselor, as described by House and Sears (2002), Martin (2002), and Sears (2002), and some reflected roles of the school counselor opposed to the views these school counseling scholars. The presented statements of some of the African American male participants clearly illustrate the first theme, perceived role of the school counselor. Aligned with this theme, the representative responses focused, directly or indirectly, on academic and personal–social issues. These two domains are commonly emphasized or recommended areas of foci for school counselors by ASCA (2003). It is interesting that the African American male participants did not perceive career issues as one of the roles of school counselors. The career domain is another recommended focus of ASCA, but no representative responses were given to reflect this domain.

In relation to the academic domain, one participant indicated that he perceived the school counselor as having a role in assisting students with academic placement and with selecting courses. For example, this student stated,
I think that the role of a school counselor should be to help the student find what classes they need in order to graduate . . . get scheduling put together that won’t stress the student out but will help their high school graduation.

Another African American male participant, although never utilizing the services of his school counselor, expressed similar sentiments:

I don’t know. I’ve never went to her. . . . If you’re not going to pass or if you need help in a class, you can go to her [school counselor], and she’ll talk to you about it. . . . Then, she helps out with minor stuff.

For this theme, many of the African American male students perceived the school counselor as having a role on matters that deal with students’ personal–social concerns. Based on the African American male participants’ responses, it was clear that personal–social matters were seen as a major area of focus for students. For example, one African American male participant stated, “I think the purpose of a school counselor is to help us [students] solve the situation [with other classmates] without violence . . . to not get too deep into the problems . . . to not make the problems worse.” Similar to the aforementioned participant, another African American male illustrated that he thought school counselors should work more with students to assist them with social issues. More specifically, he stated that school counselors should be doing the following with students: “Helping others with social problems, being there just to talk to for comfort, and to put them in a better situation.” Another African American male perceived the school counselor as being an excellent resource on matters related to personal concerns. Illustrating this point, the African American male stated,

Actually just people that we [African American males] can go to if we have any problems or if you have a friend that are going through some things, you go to the [school] counselor and try to get some advice or something like that.

Similar to the above participant, a different African American male, although never meeting his school counselors, stated that he believed that the school counselor should “help out a student, if [he or she] isn’t doing right at home . . . [the school counselor] can talk [to the student] about those problems.”

Actual Experiences With the School Counselor

Although some of the African American male participants had never utilized the services of school counselors, analysis of results revealed that those who did seek the assistance of school counselors seemed to have benefited. However, such assistance tended to focus on scheduling and academic planning. Although scheduling activities are frequently frowned upon by school counseling scholars (House &
Sears, 2002; Sears, 1999), it was a service frequently sought by the African American male participants in this study. Toward this end, this theme was categorized as actual experiences with the school counselor. It illustrates students’ usage of school counseling services. As an example of this theme, one African American male mentioned that he sought academic guidance from his school counselor. Additionally, the school counselor assisted him with “making sure [his] classes are stable . . . [letting him] know the classes [he] needed to graduate.” A different African American male acknowledged this point:

Well, starting since I’ve been in high school, I didn’t know what classes I needed to take and what I needed to do for graduation. And every [school] counselor I’ve come into contact with really just helped me put a schedule together and put me in place for graduation where I am now.

This participant further elaborated that he would “rate her [the school counselor] helpful” and that school counselors are “here to prepare the kids for graduation.” Another participant mentioned that his school counselor assisted him with selecting high school courses. He further stated that the school counselor helped him “understand most of the classes needed by breaking them down.” A different African American male participant also illustrated a similar point: “One of my [school] counselors put me in this class so I could pass and then graduate. He took me out of the class I didn’t need and put me in the class I did need to graduate.”

Comfort Level With the School Counselor

In the research literature, there is considerable evidence of underutilization of counseling services by African American males (Franklin, 1992; Lazur & Majors, 1995; J. L. Moore, 2000). The research literature equally highlights the importance of trust and rapport in the counseling process (Harris, 1995; Madison-Colmore & Moore, 2002; J. L. Moore, 2000). Feelings of mistrust, hesitancy to self-disclose, and resistance are common reasons why African American males do not utilize, or underutilize, counseling services (Bailey & Moore, 2004). Most of these explanations have historical, political, and social roots (Majors & Billison, 1992; J. L. Moore, 2000) dating back to slavery (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Parham, White, & Ajamu, 2000; Vontress, 1995).

Based on the data analysis, comfort-level issues emerged related to student–counselor relationships or interactions. Similar to what was found in the research literature on African American males and counseling, the African American male participants illustrated comfort-level issues with their school counselor. Some of the comfort-level issues were related to past school counselor experiences, family–school boundaries, school counselor time availability, and school counselor bias. The following theme, comfort level with the school counselor, illustrates this point.
One African American male participant communicated that he had a negative past experience with his elementary school counselors, which in turn contributed to his reluctance to seek assistance from his high school counselor. For example, he stated, “When I was in elementary, they [school counselors] would ask me stuff and told them [school counselors], and they [school counselors] used it against me. And, I got put away in a foster home.” Another African American male participant suggested that he only talks with family about personal matters. He further suggested that family–school boundaries exist. For example, this participant states, “You can only talk to [people like your] mom and sisters or other family members about personal problems or someone you trust that won’t tell nobody.” Aligned with the notion of family–school boundaries, a different student asserted,

What happens at home is basically a rule in the house. What’s in the house stays in the house and that happens with a lot of students. They [students] just hold it in. A lot of them bring it out, but it would be the least problem you wouldn’t want to bring any trouble toward your home.

Another African American male participant attributed his discomfort level to school counselor time availability. Illustrating this point, this student stated, “Sometimes, they [school counselors] be trying to help you, and sometimes they just want to act different, like they really don’t have time for you.” In relation to school counselor bias, one African American male suggested that school counselors tend to focus on select students. He further suggested that this contributed to students’ reluctance to use school counseling services. As another way of explaining this point, he offered the following perspective:

Some [students] might just be like they don’t like their [school] counselors, because they feel like the [school] counselors aren’t really on their jobs. . . . They [school counselors] worry about certain people for so much, but they don’t worry about all of them . . . just ready to work with who they want to.

**Discussion and Implications**

The three themes discussed in the previous section were found to be salient in the lives of African American males in special education. It should also be noted that the results of this study were aligned with the fundamentals of CRT. First, the African American male participants expressed skepticism toward the claim of meritocracy and neutrality in education, as evidenced by the following quote offered by one of the participants: “They [school counselors] worry about certain people for so much, but they don’t worry about all of them.” Second, given that an important aspect of CRT is the recognition of the experiences of people of color as fundamental sources of knowledge (Delgado, 1995), the African American male participants’ responses,
in and of themselves, are in line with fundamental facets of CRT. Last, as has been previously stated, African American males often miss meaningful educational and social experiences in general education curricula (Davis, 2005; J. M. Patton, 1998), particularly those students who are erroneously placed in restrictive special education classrooms. Hence, these students are more prone to experience lower levels of achievement and limited postsecondary and employment opportunities (Markowitz et al., 1997; J. M. Patton, 1998). Thus, the assertion that the overrepresentation of African American males in special education constitutes a form of oppression is not an exaggeration. Given that a goal of the current study is to render findings designed to help this marginalized student group, the findings of this study represent an attempt at the elimination of oppression, which is a common theme in critically informed research (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993).

Distinct improvement in the disproportionality of African American males in special education programs will require contributions from multiple stakeholders, namely, school counselors. Therefore, it is essential that educational professionals, such as school counselors, play a significant role in helping schools meet the needs of educationally vulnerable student populations, such as African American males in special education. Accordingly, the following recommendations present viable implications for school counselors based on the emergent themes from this study. The below information uses the framework of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative—advocacy, leadership, teaming and collaboration, counseling, consultation, and use of data—to present recommendations to school counselors (House & Sears, 2002; Martin, 2002).

Advocacy

1. Quite often, African American male students in the current study offered varying accounts of negative experiences with school counselors. As such, school counselors should be vigilant in their quest to advocate on behalf of these students in order to gain their trust and build rapport.

2. None of the African American male students in the current study perceived school counselors as functioning in the role of career counselors. Therefore, school counselors should take the initiative and inform students in special education of their career counseling skills in addition to their ability to assist with academic and personal-social issues.

3. The African American male students who sought the assistance of school counselors were found to benefit, even it was related to scheduling. To that end, school counselors should enlist the help of these students in their attempts to advocate for the utility of their services.

Leadership

1. School counselors should be cognizant of African American male students’ concerns regarding the invisibility of school counselors. It is imperative that they be proactive about developing innovative ways to make their presence felt throughout
the school. In addition, school counselors should be seen interacting with students of different gender, races, and academic levels in order to help prevent broad generalizations of who receives counseling services most often.

2. School counselors should become involved in organizations, such as The Council for Exceptional Children, that are devoted to meeting the needs of students in special education programs. Such involvement can provide useful information for working with educational vulnerable populations, such as African American males in special education.

Teaming and Collaboration

1. School counselors should develop ways to collaborate with other educators (e.g., school psychologists, social workers, teachers, and administrators) to develop culturally sensitive classification practices for special education. Such collaborations could help improve school outcomes for students.

2. Given that the African American males in this study seem to feel more comfortable with sharing personal accounts with family members, school counselors may try involving family members in counseling sessions or programs as a means to build rapport.

Counseling

1. School counselors should be aware of the counseling needs of African American males in special education and how these needs are similar and/or dissimilar to those of other gifted students. Such information is useful in developing and coordinating special school counseling programs for these students.

2. School counselors should visit special education classes in order to familiarize themselves with these students and increase visibility. Offering ongoing classroom guidance lessons is another way to improve visibility.

Consultation

1. School counselors should develop programming aimed at alerting family members to the significant influence they can have on African American males in special education programs. As evidenced by the findings, families play a critical role in African American male students’ lives.

2. School counselors need to be vigilant in their attempts to build rapport with African American males in special education programs. One way to do this is to gain the trust of family members by showing how school counseling services are of use to their children. When school counselors earn the respect of family members, they may then recommend school counseling services to their student.

Use of Data

1. School counselors should use data to identify disparities in special education enrollment according to race, class, and gender. Such information is useful in identifying trends and patterns that raise social justice issues.
2. School counselors should always advocate on behalf of the profession. They should always provide data-driven evidence to fellow stakeholders (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, etc.) demonstrating the ways in which school counselors add value to schools, especially as it relates to student populations, such as African American males in special education.

Conclusions

Although this study renders important findings, the results should be interpreted with some degree of discretion. A major limitation of the study is that it cannot be generalized to the larger African American male population in special education because its sample size is small. However, it is worth noting that this study represents one of the few, if any, attempts to examine African American males’ special education perceptions, attitudes, and experiences toward school counselors and their school counseling services. This study provides initial research that can be used to develop future investigations to advance this topic.

References


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