

Professional School Counselors and African American Males: Using School/Community Collaboration to Enhance Academic Performance

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Professional school counselors can play an instrumental role in the academic development of students with whom they interact. To empower professional school counselors in promoting improved academic performance the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2003) revised its national model. Now more than ever, professional school counselors are expected to advocate on behalf of all students to facilitate their optimal academic development. One student demographic in particular—African American males—has experienced chronic academic difficulties. In the position of advocate, professional school counselors can promote improved academic performance in African American adolescent males through school/community collaboration. This article will include suggestions for professional school counselors to become more effective advocates capable of establishing collaborative relationships that facilitate academic achievement for African American male students.

High academic performance and educational attainment constitute valuable assets which enable students to compete for desirable employment opportunities in a growing global economy (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Henfield, Owens & Moore, 2008). Jackson and Moore III (2006) assert that “today, education is arguably more important than at any other time in American history. It determines, in large measure, the degree of social mobility one has or will have in American society” (p. 202). Hurn (1993) posited that educational attainment is a form of human capital that translates directly into tangible socioeconomic dividends. Conversely, limited educational attainment, Hurn contended, severely constrains students’ ability to ascend the socioeconomic ladder. Thus, high academic performance and educational attainment are widely considered vital commodities.

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Unfortunately, the promise of educational attainment has been elusive and difficult to achieve for many students, especially African American males. During the last twenty years, the status and performance of African American males in education has been one of the most consistently researched topics (Jackson & Moore III, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). These analyses have usually presented a disconcerting picture of disengaged African American males being habitually outperformed by their counterparts (Noguera, 2003, 2009; Jenkins, 2006). Based on these observations and the aforementioned belief that students with favorable educational experiences are more likely to experience professional prosperity in adulthood (Jackson & Moore III, 2006), it is necessary to examine the factors which threaten African American males' academic engagement and performance (Davis, 2003; Duncan, 2002; Jenkins, 2006; McMillian, 2003; Maton, Hrabowski & Greif, 1998; Reese, 2004; Sanders, 1997). Given this, it is critical that educators (e.g. teachers, professional school counselors, administrators) consider their role in promoting high academic achievement among African American male students. This manuscript will examine African American males' academic difficulties, and how these difficulties have been conceptualized within educational literature. Afterward, particular attention will be paid to professional school counselors and how their role as partners in school/community collaboration can promote academic achievement among adolescent African American males. The manuscript will conclude with recommendations professional school counselors can implement to assume a role of leadership within their school.

Conceptualizing African American Males' Academic Difficulties

African American males and academic underachievement have been a recurrent theme in educational literature. Although researchers have presented examples of academically successful African American males and suggestions on how to promote future success (The College Board, 2010; Education Trust, 2003; Maton, Hrabowski & Greif, 1998; Sanders, 1997;), these images are usually overshadowed by the seemingly ubiquitous statistics illustrating African American males' academic difficulties. In conceptualizing these difficulties, researchers construct African American males' educational issues and offer recommendations for improvement based on the lens through which they understand the issue. With respect to African American male academic underachievement structural and cultural explanations are employed most often (Noguera, 2008; Wilson, 2009). The structural perspective, which examines factors including racial prejudice and discrimination and entrenched poverty, are considered useful because they pay particular attention to the adverse affect macro-level factors can exert on African American males' ability to achieve and sustain academic success (Noguera, 2008; Wilson, 2009). Numerous researchers have highlighted socioeconomic variables (Keys, Bemak, Carpenter & King-Sears, 1998) and incidents of racial mistreatment (Cokley, 2006; Terrell & Terrell, 1981; Jenkins, 2006) which they believe pose a serious detriment to African American students' academic abilities. For example, Lee and Bailey (2006) and Tucker (1999) asserted that persistent academic underachievement among African American males is precipitated in part by racial stereotypes and lower teacher expectations permeating school systems. Similarly, Ferguson (2001), Monroe (2005), Noguera (2003a, 2003b, 2008), and Townsend (2000) believe that school personnel's racially biased preconceived notions are responsible for the disproportionate disciplinary action African American males experience when compared to their white counterparts. Because structural factors can have far-reaching consequences on academic achievement and future

professional status, strategies must be devised to examine and confront their impact on African American male students (Jackson & Moore, 2006).

While scholars readily acknowledge the negative toll structural factors can have on African American males' academic performance, they also, sometimes reluctantly, identify cultural factors which also pose problems (Majors & Billson, 1992; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004; Wilson, 2009). Noguera (2008) poignantly acknowledges that the trepidation associated with adhering to cultural explanations for black male underachievement can be attributed to "the blame-the-victim perspective...which views individuals as hopelessly trapped within a particular social and cultural milieu..." (p. 25). Wilson (2009), however, argued that persistent misinterpretations of the cultural explanation for black male academic underachievement have unfortunately compromised its ameliorating potential. Noguera (2008) argues that a responsible and historically accurate application of the cultural explanation has the potential to gain insight into the educational difficulties experienced by young black males. According to Noguera (2008), such an approach would be an amalgam of structural and cultural perspectives where young black males' perceptions of academic achievement are understood within the nexus of ongoing racial discrimination, substandard educational opportunities, and pervasive and disparaging representations of black masculinity (Davis, 2003; hooks, 2004; Kunjufu, 2002, 2005; Staples, 1987; Tucker, 1999). Noguera (2008) states it thusly:

Even as we recognize that individuals make choices that influence the character of their lives, we must also recognize that the range of choices available is profoundly constrained and shaped by external forces. For this reason, efforts to counter behaviors that are viewed as injurious—whether it be dropping out of school, selling drugs, or engaging in violent behavior—must include efforts to comprehend the logic and motivations behind the behavior. Given the importance of agency and choice, the only way to change behavioral outcomes is to understand the cognitive process that influence how individuals adapt, cope and respond (p. 26).

This approach must also include an examination of African American males' social and familial networks (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). The cultural perspective has often characterized African American males' social and familial networks negatively, emphasizing the perceived adverse toll these relationships exert on academic performance. Thus, it is either insinuated or stated explicitly that academic problems are derived from a pervasive devaluation of education within African American communities. For instance, McWhorter (2000) concluded that African Americans' inability to succeed academically is attributable to pervasive victimology which underlies and promotes anti-intellectualism. While it would be naïve to imply that instances of victimization do not exist, it is irresponsible to suggest African American males' academic issues are overwhelmingly attributable to ill-equipped, unresponsive, apathetic communities. On the contrary, there are numerous examples of community intervention aimed specifically at the amelioration of African American male academic achievement. In fact, these programs in their various incarnations (e.g. mentoring programs, community wrap-around services) have been lauded as innovative strategies for confronting the academic issues which have plagued African American male students (Jagers & Watt, 1997; The College Board, 2010).

If educators are to respond proactively to the issue of persistent academic underachievement exhibited by such large segments of the black male student population, they

must gain greater insight and awareness into the overarching structural forces operating in the lives of African American males, as well as how they respond to these forces. While considerable attention is paid to the role classroom teachers and school administrators assume in elevating the performance of African American male students, professional school counselors' role as change agents is often overlooked. While ambiguity regarding professional school counselors' purpose is often to blame for this problem, professional school counselors are equipped with a repertoire of skills useful in examining the structural and cultural factors affecting African American males educationally. In an attempt to contribute to the conversation of how to improve African American males' academic performance, the professional school counselors' role as advocate and collaborator must be articulated and pursued.

Professional School Counselors' Redefined Role

The traditional role of professional school counselors as mere facilitators of in-class guidance lessons is a thing of the distant past. The transformation of the professional school counselor role has created the expectation that counselors "can no longer operate solely from the comfort of their office if they wish to better serve their constituencies" (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009, p. 269). This transformation was realized when, in an attempt to be more responsive to the changing student demographic (e.g. increased racial/ethnic and linguistic diversity) and educational disparities between majority and minority students, ASCA (2003) revised its national model for professional school counselors. The revised role of today's professional school counselors is rooted in the counseling profession's philosophical orientation towards achieving social justice by proactively confronting the issues which impinge on students' academic development (Bemak & Chung, 2009; Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009; Toporek, Lewis & Crethar, 2009).

Due to their close proximity to students, professional school counselors are ideally positioned interventionists who can work to promote the academic success of the students they serve (American School Counselor Association [ASCA] 2003; Bemak & Chung, 2005). According to the revised ASCA model professional school counselors should be committed to achieving systemic change and advocating on behalf of students through leadership strategies and establishing collaborative relationships with community entities. These objectives were to be achieved through increased accountability, and more efficient management and service delivery systems. Given the recurrent issues and barriers that confront African American male students, ASCA's national model with its increased emphasis on advocacy and collaboration, could pay large dividends.

Professional School Counselors and African American Males' Academic Concerns

Professional school counselors have been working proactively to address the academic concerns of African American male students for quite some time (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Lee & Bailey, 2006). In adherence to the revised national model (ASCA, 2003); professional school counselors are encouraged to employ more time-efficient techniques when serving African American male students. Bailey and Bradbury-Bailey (2007) developed a strategy whereby group counselors engage African American males in candid dialogue about the macro-level factors that impact their development. Bailey and Bradbury-

Bailey suggested that these discussions could help forge much needed collaborative relationships between schools and surrounding communities. Their assertion rests on the fundamental belief that in order to establish an optimal academic environment for all students, a constructive and reciprocal relationship between schools and communities must exist (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Interestingly, the professional imperative for school/community collaborations is consistent with a longstanding aspect of the African American cultural ethos, which says “it takes an entire village to raise child.” Thus, the idea of collaborations between schools and African American communities is congruent with values (e.g. interdependence and cooperation) often associated with African American communities.

Establishing School/Community Collaborations

Professional school counselors can be pivotal parts in establishing collaborative relationships with community stakeholders that promote African American males’ academic success (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Lee & Bailey, 2006). To achieve this objective, it is essential that professional school counselors examine their existing strategies and eliminate those techniques which impede these relationships. Moreover, professional school counselors must object to restrictive job duties and the expectations of administrators that stifle professional school counselors’ relationship-building opportunities (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Martin, 1998; Keys & Bemak, 1997). Professional school counselors are often expected to perform administrative duties that severely constrain their ability to establish effective school/community collaborations, including assignment to lunch/recess duty and hall monitoring responsibilities. If professional school counselors are to play a catalyzing role in the development of African American males’ academic performance, they must have administrative support and the creative autonomy to implement strategies conducive to school/community collaborations (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Trusty & Brown, 2005).

Limiting Barriers to Constructive School/Community Collaborations

To facilitate constructive school/community collaborations, professional school counselors must first demonstrate a willingness to embrace a modified role (ASCA, 2003) and relinquish traditional guidance counseling strategies (Bemak & Chung, 2005). Such a transformation would enable professional school counselors to visualize and establish relationships with community members that may have been previously inconceivable (Lee, 2001). For example, this transformation would entail the realization that traditional school hours may not enable the construction of collaborative relationships. Consequently, the professional school counselor would entertain the idea of augmenting her or his schedule to foster relationships with African American parents and community members. With that said, establishing these collaborative relationships is not inherently easily and requires patience and commitment. Therefore, professional school counselors must be supported when attempting to work collaboratively with the surrounding communities (Bemak & Chung, 2005). This support can enable professional school counselors to integrate community resources when working with African American males to facilitate their academic success. Moreover, when professional school counselors are adequately supported they can advocate within the academic and political

spheres to provoke systemic changes that are advantageous African American males' academic performance.

Community Resources and School/Community Collaboration

Professional school counselors who do not employ a strengths-based approach could erroneously conclude that a community with a depleted economic base, abandoned and dilapidated buildings is devoid of the resources to effectively address students' academic needs. As a consequence, this person might determine that discussions with these communities about improving students' academic performance would be futile. To help African American males reach their full potential professional school counselors must learn to resist the inclination to make hasty determinations about community resources and demonstrate a concerted effort to become more familiar with surrounding communities and the resources which exist there. For instance, oftentimes the underachievement of African American males is attributed to rampant victimization; the prevalence of female-headed households; the absence of biological fathers and male role models; or maladaptive behavior (Majors & Billson, 1992; McWhorter, 2000; Moynihan, 1969). While the absence of adult male role models may present certain challenges, to view such arrangements as fundamentally dysfunctional and incapable of supporting the development of African American males ignores examples of black women who perform this duty exceptionally well (Bush, 2004). So if professional school counselors operate from a very narrow understanding of what resources look like, existing community resources might be taken for granted or ignored altogether. Therefore, when professional school counselors can challenge preconceived notions, and exhibit patience and a commitment to identifying community resources, the effectiveness of school/community relationships are significantly enhanced (Walsh, Howard & Buckley, 1999).

Systemic Change within Schools

Professional school counselors are educated and trained to render services that can enhance their students' academic, social, and psychological functioning. Accordingly, professional school counselors accept positions and enter schools expecting an opportunity to perform their duties unimpeded. Unfortunately, many professional school counselors quickly observe that impediments exist which complicate their professional performance. Principals and administrators often delegate job duties and responsibilities that run counter to professional school counselors' professional expectations and desires (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Martin, 1998; Keys & Bemak, 1997). Lunch and bus duty, and class scheduling are but a few administrative functions that consume valuable time and complicate professional school counselors' attempts to engage in school/community collaborations.

Misconceptions about professional school counselors' professional identity also severely constrain their optimal functioning. Professional school counselors are often relegated to the role of disciplinarian while issues concerning academic functioning and performance are left for teachers to correct (House & Hayes, 2002). Regretfully, this professional compartmentalization can discourage collaborative relationships within schools and squanders resources to students' detriment. Consequently, professional school counselors often assume a reactionary posture and contribute very little when strategic teams are assembled to address students' needs. To initiate

empowering systemic changes for African American males, professional school counselors must critically examine the school setting to determine if all students have an equal opportunity to succeed (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Lee, 2001).

Suggestions for Professional School Counselors

To bring about the change that might translate into improved academic outcomes for African American males, professional school counselors must be adequately prepared; this means acquiring the confidence and skills necessary to forge constructive school/community relationships (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Trusty & Brown, 2005). If professional school counselors do not have these competencies, they must be provided an opportunity to acquire and refine these skills (House & Sears, 2002). The following suggestions are meant to contribute to the conversation on how professional school counselors can assume a more active role in the academic development of African American male students. Although these suggestions represent a move towards the establishment of school/community collaborations, professional school counselors must first display an earnest and sincere conviction that African American males possess the innate capabilities for high academic achievement (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Fusick & Bordeau, 2004; Lee, 2001; Whiting, 2006). The following suggestions hinge on this conviction.

1. Professional school counselors must not ignore the impact of racism when discussing African American males' academic functioning (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Cokley, 2006). On more than one occasion, researchers have found that racism or racial insensitivity can cause considerable problems for African American students in academic settings (Duncan, 2002; Henfield, Moore & Wood, 2008). Also, professional school counselors should avoid operating from a color-blind perspective. Bonilla-Silva (2006) asserts that the color-blind ideology mutes the insidious impact of racism and diverts conversations that might expose the systemic nature of discrimination which non-whites experience.

2. Professional school counselors should exhibit a strengths-based approach and demonstrate a belief that African American communities possess the ability to support African American males' academic ability (Walsh, Howard & Buckley, 1999). This approach rests on the notion that although communities possess varying degrees of resources, no community is completely without resources. When professional school counselors are convinced that resources are present in African American communities, they are more likely to be optimistic about school/community collaborations (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004).

3. Professional school counselors must confidently assert their professional identity as counselors and coherently outline their desire to function as advocates (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Martin, 1998; Keys & Bemak, 1997) for African American male students. To achieve the desired outcome, this professional identity and desire to advocate for African American males should be rooted in a sound rationale demonstrating the relationship between advocacy and improved academic performance of African American male students.

4. Administrative support can play a critical role in professional school counselors' ability to forge school/community collaborations for two important reasons. First, administrative support can send an important message that the school has a sincere interest in and commitment to African American males' academic performance. Secondly, and most importantly, because administrators often make executive decisions regarding a school's resources (e.g. classroom space, finances, etc.), their support can translate into valuable assets that could assist

collaboration efforts. As such, professional school counselors must request the support of principals and administrators as they prepare to assume an advocacy role (Trusty & Brown, 2005).

5. Professional school counselors should initiate collaborative relationships with individuals inside (e.g. teachers) and outside (e.g. mental health counselors, career development specialists) of school to provide more comprehensive services to African American males (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Keys & Bemak, 1997; Keys, Bemak, Carpenter & King-Sears, 1998; Lee, 2001; Lee & Bailey, 2006; Walsh, Howard & Buckley, 1999).

6. Professional school counselors must be proactive, rather than reactive, in establishing contact with African American parents (Lee, 2001). Ideally, this contact should occur as a courtesy and introduction or when African American males' exhibit desirable performance and behavior.

7. Professional school counselors must identify community stakeholders who can support the holistic development of African American males (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Lee, 2001; Lee & Bailey, 2006). This includes business people, prospective mentors, community activists, religious/spiritual leaders, and the like. Professional school counselors must recognize that these individuals are, in many instances, visible and trusted members of the community with tremendous insights into what occurs there.

8. Professional school counselors must consider collaborative relationships as avenues to generate public awareness and support regarding the plight of African American males in school. These relationships are an essential aspect of macro-level advocacy efforts on behalf of African American males. Such an approach can help identify possible allies who are also interested in promoting young black males' academic development.

9. Professional school counselors should employ more considerate strategies that acknowledge and respect the hectic schedules which often prevent African American parents from consistently attending school functions (Fine, 1990; Lee, 2001). Multiculturally competent (Arredondo et al, 1996; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) professional school counselors must not assume that infrequent attendance by African American parents is indicative of disinterest in African American males' academic performance. This lack of attendance could be associated with several factors, including occupations with unpredictable hours or limited vacation time/hours. Therefore, it is advisable to schedule meeting times with parents only after consideration has been made for their schedules.

10. Professional school counselors must anticipate and prepare for resistance to their advocacy and collaboration endeavors (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Trusty & Brown, 2005) from outside and within the school. It is not inconceivable that resistance could come from African American parents. Some time ago, Grier and Cobbs (1968) posited that African Americans had developed a healthy cultural paranoia with respect to European controlled institutions including schools. This suspiciousness is derived from African Americans' history of oppression and the unfulfilled promises of racial equality. On the other hand, school officials might resist these efforts and characterize professional school counselors' advocacy efforts as unmerited, preferential treatment for African American males. In either case, professional school counselors must exhibit patience, sincerity, and confidence when attempting to advocate on behalf of African American males.

Given the complex and multifaceted issues that face African American males, it would be extremely shortsighted to expect that these suggestions alone will completely rectify the situation. Nevertheless, these recommendations reflect possible measures that can be taken to enhance African American males' academic functioning. If professional school counselors consistently implement these strategies while simultaneously collaborating with school and community entities, African American males could benefit tremendously.

Summary

Historically, professional school counselors were almost solely responsible for conducting classroom guidance aimed at clarifying students' occupational trajectory (Bemak & Chung, 2005). Gradually, professional school counselors began to assume more responsibility for their students' academic performance. As this role crystallized, several counselors and counselor educators espoused the virtues of non-traditional aspects of the counseling profession; one of these aspects is the primary facilitator of school/community partnerships. Professional school counselors who function as advocates are often perceived concurrently as trouble-makers and committed professionals (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Despite these paradoxical views, collaboration allows professional school counselors to courageously address students' needs. As alluded to earlier, African American males' academic difficulties constitute genuine concerns that pose legitimate threats to their ability to achieve upward mobility. Because community collaboration has been endorsed when working on behalf of marginalized students (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009), professional school counselors must remain vigilant to produce the systemic changes that would enhance African American males' academic performance.

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