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An Analysis of the Reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model

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Abstract

This article provides an evaluation of Steen et al.'s (2023) systematic review of group counseling interventions with Black male students. The article highlights strengths of the review including the effort to center the specific and unique needs of Black male students, the avoidance of comparative frameworks, and the use of critical race theory as an organizing principle so researchers do not problematize Black boys, the social and cultural heterogeneity of Black boys. Recommendations for future research include the consideration of students' intersectional identities and studies that exhibit more methodological rigor.

Keywords: Black male students, middle school, critical race theory, school counseling

In the article entitled, *Reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model to Focus on the Needs of Black Male Middle School Youth* (Steen et al., 2023), the authors use critical race theory to conduct a systematic review of school counseling interventions designed to address the academic, career, and socioemotional development of Black male students. Findings from the review are used to revise the authors' group counseling framework (e.g., Achieving Success Everyday). A major strength of this review is its culturally responsive effort to center the specific and unique needs of Black males matriculating in K-12 schools, as opposed to enlisting comparative frameworks that suggest White middle class norms are the requisite standards against which Black students should be evaluated (Padilla, 2004). Additively, comparative research paradigms that focus on universalistic or etic approaches collapse all groups together, rather than take an emic approach that incorporates particularistic worldviews of the population under investigation. The authors are commended for centering the needs, interests, and integrity of Black boys for their own sake, without comparison to a particular reference group that reflects a normative standard. In so doing, the authors avoid deficit paradigms that situate Black boys as problematic.

Critical Race Theory

A major strength of this systematic review is the attention to critical race theory (CRT) as an organizing principle. This CRT orientation avoids the tendency to problematize Black boys because it lays bare the manner in which issues of social and political injustice impinge on the everyday lives of

African American boys. Open acknowledgment of students' racialized concerns is important because historically, Blacks were not allowed to assert their grievances or even discuss their own social contexts without the threat of violent repercussions (Hannah-Jones, 2021; Wilkerson, 2020). A CRT focus permits an incisive and unapologetic analysis of harmful structural policies and practices that undermine the educational well-being of Black boys (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Washington et al., 2023). Relevant CRT tenets address the ubiquity of racism that asserts that racist practice is embedded in every facet of American life and that racism occurs with such regularity that it is ordinary and has been normalized. Interest convergence maintains ostensibly that efforts to ameliorate the lives and education of Black boys do not take effect unless there is some opportunistic gain for those who maintain power. The critique of liberalism posits that individuals who regard themselves as liberal often impede progress. As such, whether we are discussing the disproportionately high rates of referral, suspension, and school expulsion that Black boys routinely experience (Bryan et al., 2012), the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2010), vicarious racism and trauma that many Black boys experience as a consequence of witnessing gratuitous acts of state sanctioned violence perpetrated against Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, George Floyd, etc. (Neighbors et al., 2022, what Ruha Benjamin (2019) refers to as the New Jim Code or the fact that seemingly unbiased approaches to technology such as coding and the use of algorithms reinscribe and perpetuate harm, environmental racism and the toxic exposure of Black youth to pollution levels that violate EPA standards and erode intellectual functioning (Washington, 2019), high rates of COVID exposure and subsequent death of African Americans, efforts to curtail access to the ballot through voter suppression laws, these very prominent features of American society are often ignored, yet they pervade every aspect of Black life in ways that are detrimental to Black boys' educational well-being (Welsing, 1991). Charity Hudley et al. (2020) asserted that "whether acknowledged or not, race is central, not peripheral or irrelevant, to every aspect of academic knowledge production (p. 12)."

Interestingly enough, the American Academy of Pediatrics defined racism as a social determinant of health that is exacerbated by economic, political, and social conditions, much like the ones described above (Trent et al., 2019). Regrettably, chronic exposure to racialized stress increases cortisol levels which in turn contribute to autonomic nervous system effects, immune suppression, heart disease, all of which put children on a trajectory to have poor health

outcomes. Given the foregoing discussion, a critical race theory framework is very appropriate for helping students develop heightened levels of social consciousness in ways that do not permit them to blame themselves but to look at structural features of U.S. society that reproduce inequality. This is especially important, because as early as preschool, children experience racial mistreatment (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

The interventions presented herein are designed to help Black males operate in their own self-interest by stimulating and promoting critical consciousness. Paulo Freire (1972/2012) asserted that in order “to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity (p.47).”

Because the article focuses on the strengths and possibilities of students, it disrupts deficit thinking. Deficit paradigms suggest that Black boys are responsible for their circumstances, but do not consider how systems and structures consign students to subordinate positions that undermine and erode their ability to flourish. There are two primary consequences of deficit thinking that result in educational professionals assuming that Black male students are a lost cause and the consequent application of lowered expectations, such that students become self-fulfilling prophecies (Reed, 2020).

Heterogeneity of Black Male Students

There are many different ways of being Black. As school counselors, it is important to recognize the vast heterogeneity that characterizes Black students. Most of the studies cited in the systematic review did not address the intersectional experiences of Black males, despite the fact that they represent more than the sum total of their racial backgrounds. In fact, Eugene Robinson (2011) captures this variability in his book, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. Essentially, he noted that prior to the 1960s and 70s, Black people united based on their shared civil rights concerns. Following this historical period, Robinson asserts that different groups of Black people emerged who had competing values, interests, and priorities that render them strangers to one another.

Robinson described four specific categories of Black people: (a) *Transcendent Blacks*; (b) *Mainstream Blacks*; (c) *Abandoned Blacks*, and (d) *Emergent Blacks*. *Transcendent Blacks* refer to those Blacks who are so rich and powerful that we know them on a first name basis (e.g., Oprah and Stedman; Jay-Z and Beyonce; Barack and Michelle), and very few people irrespective of their race can match these accomplishments. *Mainstream Blacks* refer to Blacks who are striving for the middle-class dream. *Abandoned Blacks* are those individuals who are inter-generationally poor and contend with the social realities of food insecurity, state sanctioned violence, inadequate housing, etc. Regrettably, African American boys are often essentialized and viewed through a narrow prism of the *Abandoned* class. *Emergent*

Blacks are comprised of Caribbean émigrés, African émigrés, and biracial individuals. Given the growing heterogeneity among Black students, of necessity, future research will need to account for the variability that may shape students’ intersectional identities and encounters with oppression as it relates to ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, social class positionality, linguistic diversity, religious orientation, etc. To illustrate, students who identify as African émigrés and Caribbean émigrés are likely to share some similarities with Mainstream or Abandoned Blacks but may have very distinctive social contexts related to entrance into the United States, social class status, migration experience, linguistic diversity, etc., requiring school counselors to have content expertise pertaining to the distinctive social contexts of students. Additively, school counselors will need the tools to navigate students’ shared and different experiences in a group counseling context without essentializing them by focusing exclusively on issues of race and representation. As advances are made in school counseling research, it is expected that future research will examine the vast heterogeneity associated with Black boys.

Small Sample Sizes

School counselors often create interventions that are innovative; however, many of these interventions lack methodological rigor that document student outcomes and inform subsequent school counseling practice which could lead to the generation of new knowledge. Ordinarily, group counseling initiatives are intentionally small in order to allow for meaningful engagement and exchanges among group members. The small group size allows students to come together around their shared interests, provides participants the opportunity to give and receive support, and focuses on solving non-pathological problems. Although these are signature features of small groups, they can promote challenges when designed as interventions. A major challenge of the review is that most of the studies in this review involve small sample sizes that make it difficult generalize findings. Studies that contain large sample sizes yield small standard errors, more narrow confidence intervals, more precise estimates of intervention effects, thus leading to more firm conclusions. In marked contrast, studies containing smaller sample sizes yield larger standard errors which results in larger confidence intervals that contribute to less precise estimates of effect and less reliable conclusions (Hackshaw, 2008). The studies within this review suggest that school counselors have noble intentions as it pertains to supporting Black males; however, school counseling professionals have devoted far less attention to methodological rigor. Young and Kaffenberger (2018) have called for more effective training during pre-service training programs in order to remove barriers to student success.

More deliberate attention to intervention components that contribute to favorable outcomes is warranted. Perhaps future interventions should consider implementation science which refers to the development of specific guidelines for conducting an intervention in an effort to promote

intervention fidelity and help school counselors pinpoint which intervention components facilitate change (Bauer et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2013).

Summary

The foregoing discussion implies that school counselors have made substantial strides in developing interventions that support the specific and unique needs of Black males in school counseling contexts. These interventions are designed to enhance their educational experience and well-being in an effort to promote more favorable trajectories for students. Future research should consider students' intersectional identities so as not to reduce them to a monolith, thus considering variability in social class positionality, immigration status, linguistic diversity, etc. Further, greater levels of methodological rigor could enhance the generalizability of studies; moreover, training programs should assume responsibility for preparing students to conduct sound research.

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