School Counselors as Social Justice Change Agents:

Addressing Retention of African American Males

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Abstract

African American students are retained at a higher rate compared to Hispanic and White students (National Center of Education Statistics, 2015). While there are many causative variables identified as explanations for racial disparities in grade retention practices, school counselors are encouraged to facilitate efforts to bridge existing gaps. This article outlines educational challenges for African American males and explores the connection between race and culture in grade retention practices in schools. The school counselors' role is discussed and implications for practitioners are provided.

Keywords: school counseling, African American males, retention, culturally responsive, advocacy

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Brown v. Board of Education (1954) has significantly impacted the American education system. The decision to integrate schools has left a lasting societal impression that continues to be a factor in educational research. Despite one's position regarding the impact of integration, African American students continue to demonstrate large educational gaps. For example, according to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 2017a), African American students are retained at a 2.7% rate compared to White students (1.7%) and Hispanic students (1.9%). Furthermore, standardized testing has historically reflected biased practices towards African American students (Tanner & Frank, 2013). Studies have indicated that African American students are underrepresented in test design sampling, which leads to racially discriminatory contexts and unrealistic performance expectations (Ford & Helms, 2012).

African American males have experienced some of the greatest educational barriers, which may be societally imposed, culturally based, or educationally institutionalized (Taylor & Brown, 2013). For example, African American males are substantially represented as students with learning disabilities compared to White males and with dropout at rates twice as high as White students (NCES, 2017b).

Critical race theory is a theoretical framework that argues that racism is engrained in the very fabric of American society and ignoring racial differences perpetuates institutionalized injustices to people of color (Boyd, 2018; Tanner & Frank, 2013). In order to address flaws in current educational norms that are racially defined, it is first necessary to acknowledge this theory and accept that school is a microcosm of

society that reflects similar systemic inequalities (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019; Rector-Aranda, 2016). There are many causative variables identified as explanations for these racial disparities in education such as academic (dis)engagement, lack of culturally responsive instruction, and unfair discipline practices (Hargrave, Tyler, Thompson, & Danner, 2016; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). As the inequities continue to pose concerns for this distinct population, it is imperative for school counselors, as social change agents, to further analyze, understand, and address causative factors. Unless these systemic barriers and individual biases are identified and addressed, schools that serve these students may be perpetuating the cycle of academic injustice and providing sub-par services to students with significant needs (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019; Schulz & Rubel, 2011; Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008).

School counselors are trained to conceptualize the challenges faced by marginalized students and develop specific interventions to address barriers to achievement (Rowell & Hong, 2013; Schulz & Rubel, 2011). One barrier that has proven to be controversial over time involves the utilization of grade retention. Although grade retention may be appropriate in some instances, the decision to retain should include thorough consideration of several factors.

Notably, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) position statement on grade retention calls for school counselors to play an active role in advocating for appropriate interventions first, before recommending retention of students (2014). To further understand and emphasize the educational needs of African American males, grade retention practices and the school counselors' role will be discussed as well as implications for practitioners.

Grade Retention Practices

Grade retention refers to the practice of having students repeat a year of schooling in which they did not meet certain educational standards (ASCA 2017; NCES, 2017a; Reschley & Christenson, 2013) and is often viewed as an intervention to bridge academic gaps. Retention practices inadvertently became more alarming after the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which called for more school accountability through demonstrated progress on standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). To comply with new federal academic guidelines, strict promotional *gating* policies were implemented in school districts across the United States (Reschley & Christenson, 2013). These policies were developed with the intention to set promotional requirements that would maximize academic targets.

Although grade retention is a nationally recognized practice, states and school districts have differing norms and procedures regarding the process. For example, some retention practices involve recycling of the previous year's subject content instead of providing students with specific and targeted support to maximize gains during the retained year (Goos, Van Damme, Onghena, Petry, & de Bilde, 2013). Another example includes the inconsistent criteria utilized to identify at-risk students and to inform retention practices (e.g., emotional maturity, physical development, social maturity, academic performance, and attendance). A national school counseling survey identified these factors as *identifiers* when considering possible interventions such as grade retention (Range, Bruce, & Young, 2014).

In another study that relied on teacher input for retention, it was found that decisions were often made based on a perspective that was unrelated to academic

ability and more related to personal attitude (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Because retention relies heavily on judgment-based decisions, this issue poses the greatest threat for African American males as reflected in retention rate data (NCES, 2017a). While many students come from diverse backgrounds, many faculty members do not (NCES, 2015). This fact is compounded for African American males as teachers with a Eurocentric point-of-view may provide input based on subjective measures, which can be heavily influenced by their frame of reference. This reflects a cultural deficiency model in that individuals of the majority group believe that all people should have the same beliefs, values, attitudes, and worldviews (Chung & Bemak, 2012). Furthermore, it has been found that grade retention places students on a path that limits educational opportunities in their future (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012).

Impact of Retention

Researchers have noted that retention does not greatly improve students' academic outlook and many school counselors view retention as an unfavorable practice as well as an overused intervention (Goos et al., 2013; Range et al., 2014). In a 2012 study, it was found that even four years after the repeat year, retained students were no closer to their peers in achievement than they would have been if they had been promoted (Moser, West, & Hughes, 2012). Retention practices have been found to cause extreme stress, low self-esteem, and worse social-emotional outcomes for retained students compared to promoted peers (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005; Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Furthermore, those at risk for academic failure are disproportionately involved with the justice system, which is often referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a phrase used to portray the

increasing connection between school failure, educational policies that facilitate student (dis)engagement, and student involvement in the justice system (Rocque & Snellings, 2017). African American males are affected by this phenomenon at higher rates compared to other subgroups (Rocque & Snellings, 2017). In 2002, Jimmerson et al. noted that early grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of later school withdrawal and dropout, increasing the risk of disengagement and dropping out by 30% to 50% (Jimmerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002).

Academic (Dis)engagement

Student (dis)engagement is an overarching construct that captures students' less readily observable, behaviors, thoughts, and feelings in response to school stimuli, such as academic, cognitive, and social interactions (Quin, Heerde, & Toumbourou, 2018). Academic (dis)engagement has been attributed to factors such as previous grade retention, student/educator interaction, and academic self-concept. In addition, it has been related to a higher likelihood of negative educational outcomes (Griffin, Cooper, Metzger, Golden, & White, 2017). Research has noted that previously retained African American male students are likely to disengage from the academic experience and find it difficult to trust the educational process (Quin et al., 2018; Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Once disengaged, they may experience a sense of learned helplessness and *helpless* students believe that success is a result of ability and that they do not have the academic ability to achieve (Rathus, 2018). These mechanisms can negatively impact social/emotional development (Goos et al., 2013). Consequently, educators may find it more difficult to connect to students who have had this experience and in turn, these

students are reluctant to work with educators with whom they do not have a connection (Hargrave et al., 2016).

Despite this challenge, it is important for educators to establish trusting connections with African American male students and to be accessible to them (Hargrave et al., 2016). High quality student-teacher relationships have been associated with achievement (O'Conner & McCartney, 2007). For example, in one study it was found that African American students with higher quality student-teacher relationships scored higher on achievement tests compared to African American students with lower quality student-teacher relationships (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002).

Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine (2010) defined *mattering* as a psychosocial experience of feeling significant to others that contributed to school success of diverse students. Their research demonstrated that a sense of mattering led to feelings of confidence, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation, which positively impacted academic performance of African American students. Additionally, researchers have noted that connectedness is essential in improving academic self-concept and promoting social/emotional development, as they are both contributing factors in increased school engagement and the likelihood of success (Gibson, Cook Sandifer, & Bedford, 2019; Hargrave et al., 2016; Moore McBride, Chung, & Robertson, 2016). Mattering is a key factor in establishing trusting relationships with African American students. All students deserve to feel as if they matter, but for African Americans, this has not been the perception for a long time. James Baldwin notes, "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time" (Baldwin et al., 1961, p.

205). This historical hostility, or cultural mistrust, refers to the psychological reaction in response to repeated experiences of oppression. As a result, it makes it challenging for African Americans to establish trust with other racial groups and leads to disconnection (Neville, Tynes, & Utsey, 2009; Vontrees & Epp, 1997).

Unfair Discipline Practices

Unfair discipline practices may also contribute to academic difficulties for African American males. Research has shown a link between school discipline and grade retention (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). Additionally, research suggests that disparities in discipline practices may also be a result of cultural mismatch between student and educator (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Gibson, 2020). For example, misinterpretation of cultural attributes such as the use of eye contact and speaking patterns (e.g., dialect, voice tone, etc.) has been noted as common barriers (Darensbourg et al., 2010). Because of societal biases that stereotype African American males as displaying more disruptive behaviors, they often face preconceived notions about their intentions and abilities when they enter the learning environment (Taylor & Brown, 2013). African American students are disciplined for more subjective behaviors while White students are disciplined for more objective behaviors (Mayes Pane, 2010). Subjective behaviors include examples such as disrespect and objective behaviors include incidents such as destruction of property. In a 2010 study that investigated the discipline patterns of African American males, it was found that most imposed infractions were due to disobedience and defiance (Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010). Additionally, African American male students were disciplined in a more punitive manner for infractions that were parallel in nature with other subgroups (Lewis et al.,

2010), which consequently resulted in a higher rate of exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion). Suspensions and/or expulsion may adversely impact academic success as they limit instructional availability and lead to missed learning opportunities.

These negative interactions can result in punitive discipline measures that may lead to distrust and cause students to emotionally withdraw from the student/educator relationship (Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Whereas fostering feelings of trust, inclusiveness, and school belonging can help African American male students view school as a place where they can be successful (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Gibson et al., 2019). Gibson (2020) contends that discipline discrepancies may be addressed by the school counselor through promotion of culturally responsive approaches focused on relationship building, policy review, and community engagement initiatives.

Lack of Culturally Responsive Instruction

Culturally responsive approaches are structured to make relevant connections between intervention objectives and the student's environment (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Research demonstrates that when cultural experiences are not infused in educational practices, cultural identity development and critical social engagement are at risk. In a recent study, findings indicated that the use of culturally relevant pedagogy was associated with improved student success (Larson, Pas, Bradshaw, Rosenberg, & Day-Vines, 2018). The lack of culturally responsive instruction may result in an inadequate learning environment for all students, further minimizing the educational potential of historically marginalized populations (Larson et al., 2018; Dee & Penner, 2017).

Educators have acknowledged the need for training to prepare them to be more culturally responsive (Malo-Juvera, Correll, & Cantrell, 2018). In response to this shift, it is important to note that culturally responsive approaches require not only awareness and comprehension of diverse cultures, but also intentional infusion in pedagogy (Gibson et al., 2019). To accomplish this task, educators must be aware of one's own culture, understand the background and influences of the students, and be able to create relevant connections using this information. Studies have demonstrated low teacher self-efficacy for incorporating culture in pedagogy (Malo-Juvera et al., 2018). For example, teachers reported challenges attempting to integrate cultural connections into course content and it has been noted that students who sense a cultural disconnect are at a higher risk of experiencing problems at school (Malo-Juvera et al., 2018: Tucker et al., 2010). Teachers also reported difficulty identifying bias and stereotypes in curriculum and assessments for culturally diverse students (Malo-Juvera et al., 2018). Many teachers provide instruction based on their frame of reference and from a traditional mindset, which tends to be grounded in Eurocentric beliefs and practices (Taylor & Brown, 2013).This monoculturalistic viewpoint is all too common, despite the diverse demographics of the American student population (NCES, 2015).

School Counselor's Role

Considering the factors above, school counselors serve an important role in the educational setting to enhance student success (ASCA, 2014). School counselors are trained to promote equity through advocacy and collaboration/leadership (ASCA, 2017). School counselors operate from a paradigm specifically designed to contribute to the academic success of all students and to bridge educational gaps. This paradigm

includes a focus on social justice, equitable access, the examination of data to inform decisions, and targeted interventions (ASCA, 2019). School counselors can facilitate efforts that promote an inclusive school culture equipped to meet the needs of African American males. Despite the existence of scholarly material that explores educational inequities (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019; Gibson, 2020; NCES, 2017a), it is not enough to simply acknowledge these disparities. To address the academic injustices illustrated by critical race theory, educators should commit to the intense task of closing educational gaps. The literature indicates that the best way to address these concerns is through implementation of data-informed, culturally relevant, strategic processes (Gibson et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2017, Larson et al., 2018). One study reflected improved academic performance of African American students as a result of a small-group intervention (Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009). Targeted interventions were also successful in bridging identification and retention gaps within advanced placement programs for high-achieving African American students (Davis, Davis, & Mobley, 2013). In order to develop effective interventions, counselors must be aware of challenges faced by this population and be prepared to advocate for necessary changes (Rowell & Hong, 2013).

Advocacy

Advocacy is a vital element in addressing the educational needs of African American males. Advocacy involves taking steps designed to interrupt systemic barriers that challenge the academic, social, and career development of these students (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2015). Given that social justice entails equitable care, concern, and treatment, counselors have a responsibility to amend these inconsistencies (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2015). School counselors must consider systematic ways to

advocate for this population. School counselors who focus on social justice utilize culturally competent strategies, direct collaboration with families (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010), and a strengths-based counseling approach (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008). Advocacy may be uncomfortable at times, but it is a necessary process for school counselors to undertake.

Advocacy at the state and district level can be beneficial for school counselors to gain support for educational policies that are inclusive. This entails not only student specific advocacy, but also the use of difficult discussions surrounding inequitable practices (Shields, Dollarhide, & Young, 2018). These advocacy discussions can be difficult because they may introduce policies, which are not supported by the majority, but may be in the best interest for some students. One such example is the controversial concept of minimum grading. Variations of this practice include the absence of zeros or the adjustment of final grades at the conclusion of each marking period (Carey & Carifio, 2012; Carifio & Carey, 2009; Carifio & Carey, 2013). Another example is homework. In some school systems, homework is a heavy component in overall grade computation. While lesson reinforcement outside of the classroom is likely beneficial, expensive consequences for non-compliance may be especially harmful for students who lack adequate support and resources. While all ethnicities may experience inadequate support and resources, African American males may be more likely to suffer adverse consequences. School counselors are change agents dedicated to improving the lives of all students by addressing their comprehensive (academic, career, and social/emotional) needs. While trained to provide school-wide services and

programs, school counselors are uniquely qualified to attend to disparity issues and should utilize a collaborative approach to maximize their efforts.

Collaboration and Leadership

School counseling may benefit from a shared leadership model which promotes collaboration between all stakeholders. Shared leadership may be defined as an inclusive approach consisting of a compilation of professional practices within the school community (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009). Effective systems included a mixture of professionals with varying skill sets and specializations working together to maximize outcomes (Elmore, 2000). Within the shared leadership model, each contributing member has a unique area of expertise that can enhance the overall quality of services provided to students, families, and communities. Research has noted shared leadership as a beneficial practice yielding positive results on school success. In one study, it was found that the combined expertise of key personnel improved school culture and helped to overcome barriers (McCarty, Wallin, & Boggan, 2014). In another study, the authors discussed the benefits of distributed leadership noting that leadership is a practice and not simply a role. The authors further noted that distributed leadership allows for more efficient utilization of collective strengths and talents (Janson et al., 2009).

Intentional-minded school counselors embrace their roles as leaders, engage in a collaborative process to minimize barriers, and develop a comprehensive approach to bridge gaps (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019). School counselors should play an active part in the identification and assessment process of at-risk students and may lend a unique perspective to team proceedings (McCarty et al., 2014). Additionally, school counselors can collaboratively engage in meaningful discussions with educators about assessment

methods. While evaluation is important, educators may adapt measurement techniques to align to a format that is more culturally responsive. For example, in addition to or as an alternative to tests, students may be assessed on projects they create or lessons they present. Adjusting the assessment structure may be beneficial when attempting to fairly measure abilities of every student and promote academic engagement (Noman & Kaur, 2014). Differentiated assessments may contribute to student success in the classroom, ensure inclusiveness, and equip them for life challenges (Noman & Kaur, 2014). As school leaders, school counselors should be part of the collaborative decision-making processes that impact student success.

Implications for Professional Practice

The twenty-first century has been marked by a shift beyond awareness of societal inequities to an emphasis on social justice and advocacy (Remley & Herlihy, 2020). Proactive leadership, involvement, and advocacy efforts of school counselors serve to improve the educational experience for African American males (Darensbourg et al., 2010). School counselors are the “keepers of school culture” promoting healthy environments reflective of high levels of student engagement, trusting relationships, and desire to attend (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019, p. 55).

In addition to advocating for equitable policies and practices, school counselors should also promote the use of culturally responsive approaches to meet the needs of this population (Larson et al., 2018). As noted earlier, culturally responsive approaches could enhance educational services delivered to students. Usage of cultural artifacts could serve to make content relatable and more meaningful. For example, school counselors may encourage the use of artifacts, which includes the infusion of culturally

relevant music, illustrations, and examples into instructional content, activities, and materials (Dee & Penner, 2017; Washington, 2015). The incorporation of these cultural artifacts may result in the establishment of relevant connections for African American males. School counselors can also suggest resources and provide ongoing instructional workshops to promote the use of strategies designed to address multiple learning styles and improve communication (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). For instance, the appropriate use of humor and music may prove to be useful tools that strengthen communication and build relationships in the classroom (Larson et al., 2018; Washington, 2015). Although humor can be beneficial, special care should be taken to ensure that the students are not the subjects of jokes. Students remember and appreciate the efforts of educators who make the time to connect to students and consequently try to bridge the cultural gap. African American male students are more likely to become disengaged from the education system when they experience disconnection, but culturally minded strategies may prevent or reduce this trend.

Building trusting school-family partnerships is essential in helping students achieve academically and feel supported in school (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019; Henry, Bryan, & Zalaquette, 2017). School counselors play a key role in nurturing these collaborative relationships. By providing relevant and responsive services, schools can begin to develop meaningful connections that interrupt the perpetuation of cultural mistrust. For example, school counselors could advocate for and facilitate training or workshops for faculty and parents (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Faculty training could be utilized to address cultural competency for school professionals. Parent workshops may be used to engage parents and positively impact

educational performance and achievement. Additionally, school counselors could conduct needs assessments to identify issues important to families and craft outreach efforts to address identified concerns (ASCA, 2019; Kaffenberger & Young, 2018). These types of activities provide opportunities for parents to be heard and may empower them to contribute to the learning environment as an active participant.

Summary

African American males are more susceptible to adverse educational experiences and those affected may require the use of targeted interventions. Grade retention, although widely used as an intervention to bridge this gap, has been identified as an ineffective practice that does more harm than good for African American males. As school leaders, counselors should be involved in the intervention and decision-making processes for these students. Due to their unique training and skill sets, school counselors are equipped to meet the needs of diverse students.

As advocacy efforts for fair educational practices continue, it is important for school counselors to embrace leadership roles and promote the consistent analysis of data with a perspective that can focus on equity. Educational research provides evidence that demonstrates the need to support African American males, but more practitioner research is needed to measure the effectiveness of various interventions. For example, as more school counselors begin to implement evidence-based approaches such as response to intervention (RTI) and multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), results could be used to promote long-term improvement and track progress for these students. These sorts of practitioner research could provide data that could be

used to inform school counseling practices and collaborative decisions made by school leadership teams.

As discussed earlier, the school-to-prison pipeline describes the association between school failure and student involvement in the justice system (Rocque & Snellings, 2017). As positive gains are observed, longitudinal research could be conducted to determine impact over time. Furthermore, results could be used to focus advocacy efforts on equitable practices and policies. Some districts have already begun to implement programs and design groups tasked with the responsibility of creating actionable steps that promote district-wide culturally responsive practices. Future research could analyze the results of these initiatives to determine impact and to aid in the expansion of effective systems. The information discussed and strategies presented in this article provide insight that may positively impact the long-term success of these historically marginalized students.

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