

## **Urban African American High School Female Adolescents' Perceptions, Attitudes, and Experiences with Professional School Counselors: A Pilot Study**

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### **Abstract**

The authors interviewed African American female students in an urban school district about their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with their professional school counselors. Data analysis indicated seven primary themes perceived by the participants, some of which included their understanding and purpose of professional school counselors and their perceptions of students who received the most support. Implications for school counselors are discussed.

*Keywords:* urban school counseling; African American female adolescents and school counseling; African American female adolescents' school experiences; African American females and urban education

There is a growing recognition of the need to explore the educational experiences of African-American female students. Historically research on African American males has overshadowed research on African American girls – who remain largely left out of social science research inquiry (Rollock, 2007). For these students, being misunderstood and invisible can lead to feelings of loneliness and profound depression (Jones & Shorter-Goodman, 2003). School counselors have unique training that allows them to provide psychological support for all children and often serve as the only school professional trained to address the

mental health needs of students (ASCA, 2005). Further research on African-American girls is important because of the unique contribution of race, class and gender in the lives of African-American females (Evans-Winters, 2005). Generally, female adolescents seem more likely to participate in gifted programs for language arts and have higher enrollment in literature courses (Sadker, 2000). However, upon graduating from high school, girls will typically consider narrower ranges in careers (Sadker, 2000). In general, African-American female adolescents excel academically (Fordham, 1993), but these impressive scores do not offer a complete and accurate reflection of their schooling experiences. Few studies speak to the schooling experiences of African-American female adolescents (Constantine, 2002; Iglesias & Cormier, 2002), and those that do examine young women from a culturally-deficient perspective (Davis, 2002; Dixon, Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005; Schoonmaker, & Philliber, 2000).

Although cross-cultural counseling has received increased attention in social science literature, research remains limited with regard to counseling strategies that assist African- American female adolescents (Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005). To recognize and facilitate African American female adolescents' developmental transitions, school counselors need adequate training to conceptualize and ameliorate how racism and other variables may affect these transitions (Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005).

### **Cultural Considerations**

Adolescence in general is a time of self-exploration and of finding one's identity. Assuming typical development, adolescents in general are undergoing major changes in physical, psychological, and social development (Erikson, 1963 & 1968). For African-American girls, in particular, they must also consider the impact of race in their lives (Evans-Winters, 2005; Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005). Historically, the study of adolescent female development has focused primarily on the experiences and perspectives of White middle-class girls. The literature's lack of strengths based inquiry warrants new studies of African American female adolescents' school experiences.

Taylor et al. (1995) conducted research that focused specifically on the experiences of at-risk girls. The findings revealed that African-American girls resisted the dominate culture's image of the perfect girl. These youths tended

to rebel against the dominate culture's perspective on proper behavior for a young woman (Duke, 2000; Rozie-Battle, 2002) by asserting themselves toward their male counterparts and emphasizing their own individuality. However, African American girls in the study reported negative peer reactions when they behaved assertively. As a result, their peers called the girls names and assigned disparaging labels. Unfortunately, the girls tended to internalize the remarks and thus, the negative social interactions had detrimental effects on both their self-image and the decisions that they made later in adolescence, such as engaging in unprotected sex or dropping out of school (Taylor et al.).

### **Socialization of African-American Girls**

Generally, the socialization of African-American girls involves incorporation of established languages and norms of society (Lipford Sanders, 2002). Racial socialization, in particular, involves learning and understanding cultural practices that will affect their experiences as African-American children in a society that is dominated by the concepts of race and class. Race and class both have a significant impact in the lives of African-American students (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Sue, 2003). Countless authors have examined the influence of these two variables on the experiences and outcomes of schooling for African-American students (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Horvat and Antonio (1999) found that White cultural rules strongly influenced the schooling process of African American female adolescents and that the intersection of race and class formed another variable that shaped these students' school experiences. African-American female adolescents at a predominately White, affluent school oftentimes focused solely on fitting in. These girls found that in order to do so they had to make others feel comfortable around them, change their dialect, and display the norms of the school. However, a strong alliance to their racial group can have positive effects on the self-esteem of African-American female adolescents (Turnage, 2004).

Schools have a responsibility to focus on the empowerment of African-American female adolescents (Paul, 2003). Schools can empower these students by teaching them to vocalize their thoughts, and school officials must understand and legitimize those thoughts (Paul, 2003). Academic settings for African-American girls must also serve as academic communities in which the community

hears, understands, and accepts their voices. There are a host of factors that school counselors can take into consideration when working with African-American girls. For this reason, we chose to focus our study on African-American girls' experiences with their school counselors and offer implications for those working in this profession.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The researchers chose participants in this study based on two criteria: (a) each had to self- identify as an African American female and b) each had to hold enrollment in a public high school. Moreover, methods of naturalist inquiry guided selection of each participant.

Ten (N = 10) African American girls from a midwestern public high school chose to voluntarily participate in the study. The median age for the participants was 15 (M= 15.27). The median grade level for participants was 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The majority of the girls (n=7) indicated that they were residing in single-parent, female-headed households. The school district has a 31% participation in the free and reduced-rate lunch program. The median household income in the community surrounding the school district is \$59,000. The community is composed of 46% African American, 46.4% Caucasian, 1.3% Latino, and 2.2% Asian. The school enrollment was 1,430 students. The average student-to-counselor ratio at the high school was approximately 476 students to one school counselor.

### **Procedures**

The principal investigator [PI] contacted a school administrator at a Midwestern large urban high school. The PI gave the school administrator an overview of the study, procedures, and methodology. She then asked the administrator's help in identifying participants. The administrator then contacted the PI with a list of 13 students who volunteered to participate in the study. The PI had an initial meeting with all thirteen students and explained the purpose of the study. Once the participants indicated their understanding of the study's purpose, each interested participant received a parental or guardian permission slip. The PI received ten of the thirteen parental permission slips distributed and moved forward with scheduling dates and times to interview the participants. All interviews took

place in a private office inside of the school's counseling center. The researchers collected study data through audio-recorded 30 minute, face-to-face meetings using a reference guide.

### Interview Guide

The researcher selected three factors for exploration of African American high school female adolescents' experiences with their professional school counselors. The three themes were: (a) perceptions of their professional school counselors, (b) attitudes, and (c) experiences with their professional school counselors. Questions were developed to explore all three areas. The questionnaire had 18 items. All participants responded to each item in the same order. The interviewers were African American females. The interviews took place in a private office. Prior to the interviews, the PI apprised students of the study's purpose and intent. The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. Participants received no compensation for taking part in this study. Each participant was assigned a number on their interview tapes and demographic forms. An outside researcher, who is a professor of statistics at a Midwestern university, transcribed the recordings. The researchers reviewed the recordings for accuracy.

### Results

This section presents seven primary themes that emerged from African American girls' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with their professional school counselors. Several of the themes seem interconnected and direct quotes from the interview transcripts will illustrate each theme.

#### *Theme 1: Students generally understood the role of a professional school counselor*

Most of the students in this study (n=8) indicated that they in part understood the purpose and roles of a professional school counselor. The participants generally reported that school counselors have training to assist and help students with their problems. Two students also indicated that professional school counselors were directly responsible for helping students with the career development process, such as selecting classes and assisting students with college information. In the words of one African American female participant: Other than scheduling classes, they are

supposed to be there to counsel us. Kind of like guidance if we have questions such as what we should be doing, classes we should be taking for college. They should be there to help. Toward the end of the year counselors that I had have been very helpful for me. Most times though, I can't really get in there to see them because there are so many kids and they have so much to do.

#### *Theme 2: Most influential persons in their high school career*

The students also repeatedly indicated building relationships with adults who influenced the students' high school careers. The participants generally reported feeling supported by individuals in the school community (administrators and office assistants). These informants also indicated that parents and professional school counselors to some degree were influential. However, the participants overwhelmingly stated that teachers were the most influential people in their high school career. One informant reported, My language arts teacher because he is easy to get along with and supportive. Another student stated, I would say my science teacher from ninth grade and my ninth and tenth grade social studies teachers. We speak to each other on a more personal level but it is still a student-teacher relationship to the point where I can feel comfortable speaking with him.

#### *Theme 3: Perceptions of students who received the most support from professional school counselors*

Generally, students indicated that they were aware that the professional school counselors were extremely busy and had a large caseload. However, the students generally reported that they perceived certain students received more support from professional school counselors than others. In the words of one African American female student, The office aides in the counseling center probably get the most assistance because they are right near the counselors and the counselors really get to know them. Another student said, I think anyone can get help or assistance. However, the school counselor pays more attention to those who are getting suspended or kicked out of school. The other people who need help only get in because you have to get really friendly with your teachers or maybe your family members or somebody who works there. It kind of gives you connections and everything. And that is where you get

the most help at. It is mainly the teachers who help. The counselors aren't people we really go to.

*Theme 4: Talking to their professional school counselors about personal issues*

Most of the students (n=8) understood that professional school counselors were available to assist students with career and personal issues. Students indicated that they had a general knowledge of the roles and functions of professional school counselors. These students also had a general understanding that professional school counselors assist with counseling students through their personal issues. However, most (n= 8) of the respondents indicated that they would not seek support from their professional school counselors if they faced personal problems. One student stated, "I don't talk about personal stuff because its personal and I really would not want everybody in my business." Another participant said, "I don't really talk about personal problems. I would rather talk to my friends." Another stated "personal stuff I keep away from teachers and schools counselors unless I can really trust them". This was perhaps the most surprising finding.

*Theme 5: Experiences with their professional school counselors*

Generally, most of the students (n=9) indicated positive relationships with their professional school counselors and they believed that their professional school counselors had favorable opinions of them. However, a few students mentioned that the professional school counselor was too busy to see them. One student stated, I'd say not very helpful. "It's hard for me to say because I guess I never actually learned to talk or speak to people. So I don't know how helpful or non-helpful counselors would be. I don't think they are helpful because they don't get to the children who need you." Another student stated, "Because it is hard for me to get in to see her sometimes when I try to get in." Students generally stated that overall, they find their professional school counselors helpful. However, sometimes when the students really need to talk, they cannot access their school counselors.

*Themes 6: Racism and Academic Support*

Most of the students indicated that they have not

encountered racism or acts of discrimination in their school. They generally reported positive attitudes toward their teachers and school administrators. However, the students did indicate that they understood that as African American women, they might face racism when they go off to college or start their professional careers. One informant noted that racism will likely affect her, but she knows that she can overcome it. Another student stated, "If I choose to stay here in state and go to college, I know, I've been to a certain college, and they are very racist. And I think that all through life you're going to be judged on if you are male or female, black or white, homosexual or heterosexual. Race is going to be a big factor though. It is something you just can't fight. There are going to be people who don't like you because of the color of your skin. And especially because I am female and then I am African American that is going to hurt me even more." Another participant stated, "We have a higher need for support because racism might affect us later down the line." Although these young women stated that they faced little racism in school, it became apparent that they understood the implications of race in a larger context.

*Theme 7: Services that can improve school counseling for African American girls*

Almost all of the participants in the study (n =9) gave advice on how school counseling services can be improved for African American girls. A large majority of the students indicated that they would like to see programming and activities that they would be interested in attending (i.e. workshops on increasing social skills and understanding relationships). One participant stated, "Increase academic programs for Black girls." Other students stated that in order to improve counseling services for African American girls, school counselors must first remove their stereotypes. In the words of one African American female student: "I think the best advice I could give is for them to have no expectations or low thoughts ahead of time because if you have an assumption of someone, it alters your relationship with that person. If you hear that someone has done something, you kind of automatically, whether you realize it or not, you start to make yourself not like that person just because of what you heard.:" Another student said, "Be fair and do not judge us. I think counselors talk to other people about students before they get to know them for themselves"

## Discussion

This study identified and explored the wide range of perceptions, attitudes, and experiences reported by African-American female students in their interactions with professional school counselors. School counselors must be aware of the cultural influences on the lives of African-American female adolescents and their own unique role in facilitating the positive development of these students. If practitioners wish to improve their performance of these critical services, then they must make greater effort to understand the complex interplay between class, race, and gender in the lives of African-American female adolescents (Evans-Winters, 2005).

One of the most prominent findings of our study was students' reluctance to share and discuss personal issues with school counselors. Although they were aware that professional school counselors were available to assist with these problems, over half of the students indicated that they were highly unlikely to take advantage of this resource. One explanation for the students' unwillingness to address personal issues may signal cultural mistrust between professional school counselors and their African-American clients (Esquelin, M Thompson, Neville, Weathers, Poston, & Atkinson, 1990; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & 2007; Sue & Sue, 2008). Research links mistrust toward counselors, particularly White counselors, to discrimination against African Americans in the larger society (Sue, 2003; Thompson, Worthington, & Atkinson, 1994). In addition, persons within the African-American community seeking professional services for emotional distress may face stigmatization (Jones & Shorter, 2003; Sue, 2003).

Female African-American high school adolescents may still see school counselors as a part of the larger, potentially hostile society and thus be unwilling to expose their vulnerabilities by sharing personal problems. When counseling African-American females, school counselors must have an awareness of the racism and discrimination that these students face and grow to expect from society, and develop strategies to challenge that preconception in the counseling relationship.

Professional school counselors can demonstrate their commitment to supporting the mental health needs of African-American female adolescents by reaching out to

these students, assisting them with personal issues, and fostering their positive self-concepts (Ford & Moore, 2006). In general, African-American students with a high self-concept are more likely to achieve than those with a low self-concept (Ford & Moore, 2006, Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005). It is the responsibility of professional school counselors to take the necessary first steps on behalf of their students and focus their efforts on identifying ways to help them succeed academically and socially (Butler, 2003). To meet their students' needs fully, professional school counselors *must* be culturally competent and cognizant of the different ways diverse students express emotions. Further, professional school counselors must adapt their counseling outreach efforts to mirror diverse students' help-seeking behaviors (Constantine & Gainor, 2001).

Our findings also revealed that participants somewhat understood school counselors' roles and functions but hesitant to seek these services. Hence, school counselors must take an active role in reaching out to the African American female adolescents that they serve. Through programming, school counselors can facilitate these adolescents' full awareness of the school counselor duties and responsibilities and highlight the advantages of accepting counseling support.

Using a national sample, Flowers, Milner, & Moore (2003), found that teachers' expectations had a significant impact on African American students' educational aspirations. A large number of our study's participants reported teachers as the most influential persons in their high school careers. Thus, it is important that professional school counselors develop effective and positive working relationships with teachers so that they can collaborate to effectively engage and assist African American female students.

The majority of the students interviewed (n =9) gave suggestions on how school counseling services might be improved for the benefit of African American female adolescents. Students indicated that they would like to see more programming geared specifically to their needs and interests, including programs meant to foster healthy peer and romantic relationships. They also indicated that they hoped professional school counselors would abandon preconceived notions of African-American females before getting to know them.

Considering these results, the authors offer a few crucial steps that school counselors can take to prepare African-American female students academically. (1) Professional school counselors can consult with teachers and other school officials to help identify interventions and curricula that are likely to support the success of African-American students. (2) Professional school counselors must be willing to assist African-American female students with exploring the effects of racism on their lives. School counselors must also know how to teach these students coping mechanisms to deal with racist attitudes and discrimination. (3) School counselors must serve as advocates and agents of change within their school settings. They must be willing to address discriminatory practices and behaviors exhibited by teachers and the larger academic system.

### Limitations

The authors urge caution in generalizing our findings to all African-American female adolescents. Our study only included 10 self-identified African-American female students at one Midwestern public school in an urban setting. It is unclear if African-American female adolescents from different geographic locations or backgrounds that are more affluent would have similar experiences.

Another possible limitation to note is that historically African Americans do not typically seek or find value in counseling. Traditional views of counseling hold that it is an outlet for White middle class individuals. Many people of color, specifically African Americans, associate seeing a counselor with being crazy. Today, many African Americans still see counseling as a forced means of conforming to a White system that has historically excluded African Americans. However, either negative views learned from adult influences or the mass media about counseling could have affected participants' perceptions.

In any qualitative study, the importance of data integrity and triangulation remain critical aspects of data analysis. The researchers' took steps to preserve the veracity of the data by using an outside reviewer and coder.

### Implications and Conclusion

In general, the results of this study indicate that African-American female adolescents understand the roles and functions of professional school counselors to some extent. In particular, students understood that counselors

were available to assist them with personal problems and career preparation. However, participants' understanding of professional school counselor roles seemed to focus on stereotypical guidance functions such as scheduling classes or planning schedules. Scheduling classes is far outside counselors' primary mission as defined by the American School Counselor Association [ASCA]. ASCA defines a school counseling program as:

One that is comprehensive, preventive in nature, developmental and central to the primary mission of the school. It has prescribed delivery systems, is implemented collaboratively by credentialed professional school counselors and others, and is data driven. Data driven programs identify students' needs using disaggregated data and evaluate the impact of the program on the students' needs, student competencies, and associated outcomes. Results or outcome data improve the program (Brown & Trusty, 2005, p. 2).

This study highlights the need to clarify the roles and functions of professional school counselors. Similar to its usage in the present study, such findings can offer state department supervisors, principals and district coordinators the opportunity to inform students of the roles and functions of professional school counselors. School counselors should make an effort to introduce students to the existence, purpose, and advantages of professional school counseling early in their academic careers. The study also points to a need for school counselors to understand and support the personal/social needs of African-American female adolescents. Professional school counselors must be knowledgeable about the populations that they service and become agents of systemic change.

Two issues warrant further study. First, African American female adolescents in this study report reluctance to discuss personal/social concerns with professional school counselors. Second, the participants report frustration that they do not receive counseling services upon request. As we consider our professional charge to meet the needs of all students, professional school counselors must demonstrate skills that meet the personal/social needs of African-American female adolescents in a timely and responsive manner.

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## **Creative Approaches to School Counseling: Using the Visual Expressive Arts as an Intervention**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the use of creative arts in school counseling. There is a specific focus on the use of visual arts, particularly such methods as drawing and painting. Existing literature, which supports the use of art in school counseling, provides the paper's rationale. In addition, the paper explores different art techniques that school counselors can utilize.

*Keywords:* creative arts in school counseling, school counseling and art

The use of expressive arts in counseling has changed since its roots in psychoanalytic theory prominent during the 1940's (Kahn, 1999). Initially, therapists used art therapy as a psychoanalytic tool to analyze and interpret the meanings of client art. The focus was on the unconscious and free association. Since the 1940's, both goals and focus of art in counseling has changed from a psychoanalytic stance to one which supports the ego, fosters the development of identity, and promotes maturation. School counselors may feel less inhibited using art as an intervention in counseling as they discover that there is not a need for in depth interpretation of a student's work.

Sketching, drawing, and painting can be used as a tool for counselors as it allows students to visually express and release their emotions as well as enhance overall health and well-being (Malchiodi, 1998). Students who have difficulty talking about embarrassing or traumatic life events such as family violence and abuse can express

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