

Overrepresentation of African American Males in Special Education Programs:

Implications and Advocacy Strategies for School Counselors

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### Abstract

Overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs has engendered much concern within the education community. However, little information is available on how the counseling profession can advocate for this particular population. The purpose of this article is to illuminate information pertaining to the overrepresentation of African American males in special education. Strategies for school counselors to intervene and advocate for African American males and their families will also be discussed.

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Recently, the United States celebrated one of the most prominent changes to the landscape of public education, the *1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* decision. The *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* (Johnson, 1994) case demonstrated that racial segregation inflicted psychological harm on African American children. Specifically, Kenneth Clark, an African American psychologist, provided expert testimony by describing an innovative psychological test used with African American and White dolls. He concluded that African American students in segregated environments equated positive connotations with White dolls when researchers asked them to choose which doll represented goodness (Clark & Clark, 1947). Through the use of this doll test, lawyers in this case, namely the late Thurgood Marshall, argued that separate and unequal school conditions that African American students endured produced a sense of inferiority and lowered self-esteem. Using this research as the central focus of the case, the lawyers argued that the goal of integration was to provide African American students with the opportunity to have the same educational advantages as their White counterparts since so many segregated African American schools had substandard conditions, and resources (Blanchett, Brantlinger, & Shealey, 2005).

This legislation desegregated public schools and changed the separate, but unequal philosophy of American society. Although American schools have enjoyed limited integration through busing and other logistic strategies, at the same time, educational policies and practices have created a new system of segregation

(Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). In fact, one of the “separate but unequal” dilemmas of the twenty first century is the over-representation of African American boys in special education programs. Current statistics indicate that African American boys represent only 9% of the total student enrollment in public schools, yet in the category of mental retardation their enrollment percentage is more than double (20%). In other categories such as emotional disturbance and learning disability, African American males are again overly represented accounting for 21% and 12% respectively (US Department of Education NCES, 2000).

The counseling profession, with the exception of Lee (1991), has remained relatively silent on this issue, even though extensive writings have been published within educational literature. The overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs has engendered much concern within the education community, however many scholars and government agencies have been unable to definitively answer why this phenomena exists. Therefore, the purpose of this manuscript is to illuminate information pertaining to the overrepresentation of African American males in special education. Additionally, strategies for school counselors to intervene and advocate for African American males and their families will also be discussed.

#### Causes of Overrepresentation of African American Students

Within the past three decades, studies continue to reveal a pattern of overrepresentation of African American students in special education classrooms for mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, behavior disorders, physical impairments, visual impairments, and speech impairments (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). Such overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of students in special education

programs is significantly close to the total student population. For example, 14.9 percent of African Americans between the age of three to 21 years old received services under IDEA in 2000 (US Department of Education NCES, 2000). Yet, African American students only made up 16.6 percent of the total school population in that same year (US Department of Commerce, 1972-2000).

There is much debate over what is the exact cause for the common placement of African Americans, particularly males, in special education programs. One possible explanation is that White American teachers may have fear of African American men in general and African American male youth in particular. Demographic data indicates that more than a third of children in elementary and secondary schools are students of color (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran, 2004). However, in distinct contrast, the United States teaching force is predominately White, middle-class and female (Ladson-Billings, 2001; US Department of Education, 1998). To further compound the problem, many White American teachers come from White American neighborhoods and attended predominately White colleges of teacher education. Furthermore, most teacher education programs do not adequately address the racial imbalance between students of color and White American teachers.

Johnson (2006) contended that how we think about African American men affects the way we respond to them. He further explained that much of the discourse in the psychological and educational literature that pertains to African American young men has tended to portray them as unintelligent, drug addicted, violent sexual predators who are incarcerated and unemployed. As result, when African American men or male youth are described in a pejorative manner, it becomes easier for society in general and

teachers in particular to deny their intentional, creative and intellectual qualities, all qualities associated with being a “good student”. It is important to note that research has shown that many teachers make their special education referral decisions primarily on the extent to which they believe a child is “teachable” or non-threatening (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Hale-Benson, 1982 and Kunjufu, 1985).

Subjective and unreliable identification procedures have also been associated with the overrepresentation of African American males in special education. Teacher referrals along with testing are the primary measures used to identify whether or not a student is in need of special education services. Each of these measures poses unique challenges to the crisis of the frequent placement of African American males in special education. Both methods have questionable reliability and have been critiqued for their use. For example, the Executive Committee of the Council for Child Behavior Disorders (1989) suggests that there are problems with the referral process as the initial screening procedure for identifying students for special education programs because it is insensitive to students with internalizing problems.

In addition to the Council for Child Behavior Disorders, Hilliard (1990) and Cummins (1986) believed that biased referrals and misdiagnosis mainly occurs in the “judgmental” categories of special education classifications. The two judgment categories are most commonly, severe emotional disturbed (SED) and mild mentally retarded (MMR). According to Harry and Anderson (1994), diagnoses of these disabilities are essentially based upon subjective clinical judgment rather than verifiable biological criteria. It is also important to note that the two most common types of tests used in the diagnosis of behavioral or learning disabilities are intelligence tests and

behavioral assessments. Critics of testing methods used as tools for placement of African American students into special education make several observations; IQ tests inevitably reflects the cultural knowledge base and cognitive orientation of its creator(s) and of the sample on which they have been standardized; expectations about students' language skills are determined by the standard language of the majority; and education professionals are in need of specific training and interpretation of speech and language tests. Thus, the entire testing process appears to be bias and students whose cultural and social experiences do not include information and skills tested by these instruments are placed at a disadvantage (Harry & Anderson, 1994). For this reason, the Board of Assessment and Testing (BOTA) concluded that the usefulness of IQ tests in making special education decisions needed to be reevaluated (Morrison, White, & Fever, 1996).

#### Effects of Frequent Placement in Special Education

Educators and parents have known that the decision to identify a child as disabled, particularly if they come from a diverse ethnic or cultural background has lifelong implications (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999). Some of their concerns include 1) the placement of these children into segregated settings, 2) the questionable benefits of their placement in special education and 3) the detrimental effects of labeling a child as special needs (Dunn, 1968). In addition, the high drop out rate, increased chance of incarceration and the limited career preparation and employability are the effects that repeated placement of African American males in special education encounter.

*Detrimental Labels and Negative Feelings about Special Education*

One area of limited discussion in the literature is the emotional affect that classifying a student with a disability has on their self-concept. Many scholars have noted the stigmatizing effects that placement in special education has on students (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Dunn, 1968; Goffman, 1963). The misplacement of an African American child in a special education program from a general education program may produce a change in a child's self-worth, personal goals or achievement.

*Increased Chance of Incarceration and High Drop-out Rate*

Another area that is affected by the common placement of African American males in education effects are the increased chance of incarceration and high school drop out rate. Harry & Anderson (1994) assert that special education programs do not prepare African American males to take their places as productive members of American society, nor do they provide the same academic and social curricula in general education. Rather, special education programs place students at a greater risk of dropping out of school (Harry & Anderson, 1994). A high early drop out rate has devastating effects for African American men because students who leave school early increase their chances of being incarcerated. Furthermore, up to 80% of the prison population has dropped out of school (Whaley & Smyer, 1998). Since seventeen percent of all African American males between the ages of 18-29 are incarcerated, the combination of high drop out rate and increased chances for incarceration has a negative affect on African American males.



### *Limited Career Preparation and Employability*

With the detrimental labeling effects, high drop out rates and increased chances of incarceration, special education programs can have a long-lasting effect on the quality of life for African American men. The future of African American men in special education programs seems even more monotonous when viewing their limited career opportunities. Many scholars have reported that youth from virtually all disability groups are employed at a lower rate than students in general education programs (Hasazi, Johnson, Hasazi, & Gordon, & Hull, 1989; Edgar, 1987; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985). In these prominent studies, it was revealed that the employment rate for youth with mild disabilities is 61% and 69% while the national statistics from high school students in general education is over 80% (Markowitz, Garcia, & Eichelberger, 1997).

### Intervention and Advocacy Strategies

The American School Counselors Association (ASCA) has envisioned a change in the role of school counselors to facilitate systemic changes in the educational environment. In 1993, ASCA issued a position statement that included nine roles that school counselors can take in working with students' with disabilities (ASCA, 1993). Also, according to Myers (2005), the ASCA National Standards (ASCA, 2003) and the ASCA National Model (2003) call for an increased emphasis on meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Although substantial literature acknowledges that school counselors do not have much training in working with students with disabilities (Myer, 2005), the ASCA position statement identifies advocacy, and working as a part of the multidisciplinary team as roles that school counselors can take in making changes to the referral system for special education as it relates to African American male students.

Specific strategies for assisting school counselors to intervene to change policies or procedures that create this educational predicament seem necessary to assist school personnel in performing in these roles. Furthermore, the immediate and long-lasting effects of frequent placement in special education on African American male students, and the long-term effects on society, warrant specific strategies to intervene and advocate for African American males. Additionally, specific strategies could nullify any contention by other school personnel that the gamut of possible interventions has been exhausted. Therefore, the following eight strategies are offered to assist school counselors and other school personnel in advocating and intervening on behalf of this specific population.

#### *Micro-level advocacy with students*

The *ACA Code of Ethics* (2005) mandates that school counselor's advocate for their clients. Ezell (2001), described advocacy as "purposive efforts to change specific existing or proposed policies or practices on behalf of or with a specific client or group of clients" (p. 23). Another definition of advocacy offered by Toporek (2000) describes advocacy as actions taken by counseling professionals to change environmental barriers that hamper clients' well being. Although other school personnel are not held accountable to the *ACA Code of Ethics* mandate for advocacy, they may have a moral responsibility to change educational systems that allow for the overrepresentation of African American males in special education.

Advocacy at the micro-level involves working with the student to empower them to effect internal change. According to Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, and D'Andrea (2003), one of the main purposes of advocacy is to increase the client's sense of personal power.

African American male students who believe they are powerless to change may divest themselves of any interest in the educational system. The loss of interest may be the catalyst that leads to their placement in special education due to the misperceived, subjective, and contraindicated diagnosis of having emotional or behavioral problems.

Lee (2003) suggested that empowerment initiatives for African American males should be developmental and preventive in nature. He proposed counseling initiatives aimed at helping youth develop the awareness, knowledge and skills to solve problems constructively, and make self-affirming decisions when faced with challenges. This preventive approach can be carried out in group activities such as social skills building, and proactive anger management interventions. School counselors and other school personnel should place their focus of attention on prevention interventions that reduce the student's chances of being labeled unreachable, unteachable, or threatening. The loss of self-esteem from such labels and the subsequent alienation resulting from being placed in special education can create a devastating sense of powerlessness for African American males. The importance of African American males having a sense of personal power was noted by Perkins (2003), who suggested that having a sense of personal power is something that many African American male youth feel is crucial to their survival.

#### *Systemic advocacy on behalf of parents and students*

The advocacy competencies adopted by ACA suggest that counselors advocate on behalf of their clients by negotiating relevant services and education systems on behalf of clients and students. The procedures used to identify African American males

for special education include subjective referrals from teachers and testing measures; and as stated earlier, both of these methods are problematic.

Advocacy to make changes in referral and placement procedures poses a challenge for school counselors. Although the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) require assessment for special education to be conducted by a multidisciplinary team (Harry & Anderson, 1994), school counselors are not always included in this process.

The ACA advocacy competencies provide the following suggestions for school counselors to help make systemic changes to alter the status quo in educational systems: 1) identify environmental factors that impinge on student's or client' development, 2) provide and interpret data to show the urgency for change, and 3) in collaboration with other stakeholders, develop a vision for change.

#### *Collaboration with parents*

Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, and Dodson-Sims (2005) suggested that school counselors expand their knowledge of and become intentional in maintaining a comprehensive perspective on African American families. Harry (1992) identified two unsubstantiated myths concerning African American parents; the belief that African American parents do not value education for their children and African American parents are apathetic and do not care about their children. Although these myths have been dispelled by research, many school counselors may continue to hold them to be true. Thus, a change in school counselor's attitudes concerning their beliefs about African American families is needed before a concerted and collaborative effort to effect systemic change can take place. One such change in attitude can be accomplished by school counselors gaining an understanding of African American parent's role in

preparing their children for the educational environment. According to Bradley and Sanders (1999), “parents have the difficult role of preparing African American children to succeed in a society that has a history of being hostile and racist toward African Americans”. Additionally, Lee (as cited in Bradley and Sanders, 1999) noted that teachers, counselors, and administrators have a negative attitude toward African American male students. However, despite the history of racism and discrimination faced by African American families, they have a legacy of providing love, pride, hard work and stability (Lee, 2003), and a desire for an education for their children (Sanders & Bradley, 2002). This type of knowledge can help a school counselor gain an understanding of African American family dynamics, and is crucial to the development of a collaborative relationship with African American parents.

Still other impediments to the collaboration of African American parents and school counselors are African American parent’s mistrust of the special education assessment process, and lack of communication (Harry, 1992). The lack of parental involvement in the assessment of children for placement into special education tends to increase their mistrust and further exacerbates the lack of communication between African American parents and school counselors. The cyclical nature of lack of involvement, mistrust, and lack of communication, can be broken by utilizing Bradley et al. (2005) suggestion that school counselors involve parents early in the school year in outlining expectations and determining goals for African American male students. This suggestion accomplishes several purposes: 1) it establishes rapport between African American parents and school counselors, 2) it allows for initiation of communication in a positive context before problems arise, 3) parents and school counselors have a clear

understanding of each others expectations and goals, and 4) students come to understand the collaborative nature of the parents and school counselors relationship. School counselors increased knowledge of African American families; their intentionality in dealing with them, and the establishment of a collaborative relationship as stakeholders in African American male student's education, sanctions school counselors as a force and a voice in advocating for the parents and children.

### *Community collaboration*

School counselors should venture beyond the boundaries of the educational system as advocates for students. Specifically, school counselors can act as liaisons between the schools and community resources. Several researchers have highlighted the need for school counselors to become familiar with community resources and engage in collaborative efforts to advocate for African American male students and their parents (Bradley, et al., 2005; Harris, 1995; Harvey & Hill, 2004; Mahiri & Conner, 2003; Omizo, Omizo, & Honda, 1997). For example, Mahiri & Conner noted in their study of Westwood Charter School in Northern California, that teachers, staff and community leaders worked together to develop several after school and an extended day program that provided additional academic and cultural activities for African American male students. Although this study did not indicate whether this collaborative effort resulted in a reduction of referrals for special education, it did increase the amount of interaction between school personnel and community leaders.

An important and viable community resource for school counselors to engage in collaborative efforts with is the African American church. The African American church is a community resource that has been instrumental in the social, religious, spiritual and

cultural development of African American children. Bradley et al. (2005) suggested that the significance of the African American church in the lives of African Americans warrants the establishment of a working relationship with school counselors.

Additionally, Harris (1995) recommended that school counselors contact ministers in the community to assist with the development and promotion of group-oriented services for African American students. According to Harvey and Hill (2004), the African American church promotes resiliency in African American children. Furthermore, Zimmerman and Maton (1992) found that involvement in the church and other instrumental activities reduced high-risk behaviors of African American male students. The African American church is a community institution that has been entrusted with the spiritual, religious and moral guidance of African American children, and may be an effective partner with school personnel.

### *Early Intervention Activities*

Algozzine, Christenson and Ysseldyke (1982) concluded that there is a social-political context in which the referral to placement process operates. This social-political context involves the role that teachers play in the disproportionate numbers of African American males in special education. Since there is a high probability that teacher referrals for psychological evaluation will result in the placement of students into special education, Algozzine et al contend that special education referrals are teacher-driven. This means that students identified with special needs will be tested and subsequently placed in special education once a teacher initiates the process by making a referral (Algozzine et al; Artiles & Trent, 1994). Given this social-political context, school counselors need to know that there is very little they can do to minimize the

disproportionate representation of students of color in special education once teachers make a referral and students are ultimately placed into the special education system. However, it is imperative to note that school counselors can be proactive by intervening and working with students before a referral for special education is made.

School counselors are in the unique position of addressing this overrepresentation problem through prevention and early intervention activities (Bowen & Glenn, 1998). As Knotek (2003) notes, pre-referral and ancillary services can reduce the number of referrals to special education for students of color. Craig, Hull, Haggart, and Perez-Selles (2000) describe effective pre-referral services as the implementation and identification of interventions that address students' strengths and needs, educational and social issues, medical history, experiential, cultural, and linguistic background and the family's and teacher's perspective. Specifically, some early intervention or pre-referral activities that school counselors can initiate include behavior management strategies like individualized behavior contracts, counseling techniques such as solution-focus, reality or choice therapy, and culturally appropriate reinforcements that encourage positive behavior. Other early interventions include multicultural classroom guidance activities that could help children of color develop a sense of personal well-being (Omizo & D'Andrea, 1995). Additionally, school counselors can help students with behavioral and anger management problems through small group and individual counseling (Deck, Scarborough, Sferrazza, & Estill, 1999). Other techniques school counselors can use as early intervention activities include role playing, guided imagery or relaxation exercises, social skills training, cooperative learning experiences and play therapy (Bowen & Glenn, 1998).



### *Consultation*

The American School Counselor Association has identified several things school counselors should do to implement PL 94-142. One of them includes consulting with appropriate personnel on the educational and affective needs of students with exceptionalities (ASCA, 1994). Since there are various aspects of consulting, school counselors can do many things to address the overrepresentation of African American males using this strategy. For instance, school counselors can conduct or arrange in-service workshops for teachers and school personnel on developing sensitivity to the needs and challenges of persons with disabilities (Bowen & Glenn, 1998). Through consulting, school counselors can also help to establish facilitative relationships with parents and school personnel. In addition, school counselors can also help to promote good student-teacher relationships by consulting with teachers and students (Bowen & Glenn, 1998).

### *Professional Development in Special Education*

Since the passage of PL 94-142, the training and preparation of school counselors to work with students who have special needs has been a recurring concern (Scarborough & Deck, 1998). Although this legislation and others related to students with special needs encourages greater school counselor involvement with students who have disabilities (Sweeney, Navin & Myers, 1984), much of the research indicates that there is no uniformity in the preparation and training of school counselors to work with students who have special needs. Many school counselors do not have much training to work with students with disabilities (Deck et al., 1999; Milsom, 2002). For example, in a national survey of school counselor preparation programs, Perusse, Goodnough, and

Noel (2001) discovered that only 13.2% of the 187 programs (63 were accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Education Related Programs) required coursework in special education. Furthermore, only six states require training or coursework in the education of children with disabilities in order to obtain a school counseling license or certification (Farrell, 1996; Lum, 2003). Therefore, Deck et al. (1999) and Milsom (2002) suggest school counselors assume some responsibility for their own learning in the area of special education by seeking out special educators and pursuing continuing education opportunities. Another area of professional development that has been suggested for school counselors is multicultural counseling or training (Constantine, 2002).

#### *Racism and School Counselors*

While many of the strategies suggested here offer school counselors practical steps they can take to advocate for African American male students and their parents, such efforts are futile if school counselors do not reconcile or come to terms with their true feelings about supporting these students. School counselors of all races and ethnicities have the potential to work successfully with Afro-American youth, but it is important that they engage in active exploration and resolution of their own biases (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). The attitudes and beliefs school counselors hold about race and racism may also contribute to this education problem even though teacher bias and racism has been identified as a major factor in the disproportional representation of African Americans males in special education (Neal, Davis McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2001). One attitude that school counselors may hold is colorblindness or treating all children the same regardless of race. Fusick & Bordeau warn school counselors against

this attitude or belief because they feel to be blind to race is to ignore the impact of race and racism on African-Americans. Rather, school counselors should express the message that race and culture are important (Fusick & Bordeau).

School counselors may believe or assume that black children or youth are not motivated to compete with standards (White & Johnson, 1991). This attitude can be very paralyzing to school counselors serving as advocates for African American students because this attitude encourages school counselors to focus on performance inconsistencies rather than equal opportunity, personal choice and empowerment (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). A third non-constructive attitude or belief that school counselors may have is pity. This is another attitude that inhibits school counselors from being effective because it creates distance between the school counselor and student (Bowen & Glenn, 1998). Given the negative impact that these attitudes can have, it is important that school counselors examine themselves to consider whether or not they hold these attitudes or beliefs. Furthermore, school counselors need to eliminate all of his or her behaviors that suggest prejudice or racism (Locke, 1995).

Another reason why school counselors need to examine the issues of race and racism is because school counselors should be in a position to not only be aware of their racist attitudes, but also those of other staff personnel. Although racism can manifest in various forms ranging from stereotyping to committing acts of violence against persons of color, school counselors must address the range of racist attitudes (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). In understanding the dynamics of racism, school counselors need to be aware of the institutional racial inequities that African American students face in the educational system in order to serve as advocates. Moreover, school

counselors who have a genuine interest in addressing the overrepresentation of African American males should be in a position to identify and respond to some of the systemic, institutional, and social-political forces at work in the school system in order to advocate for African American males.

### Conclusion

The enduring consequence of the overrepresentation of African American male students in special education will be manifested by the impact it has on American society. Unequivocally, the high drop-out rate, limited opportunity for employment and possible increased chance of incarceration are consequences for which American society will have to make recompense. Therefore, thoughtful consideration must be given to how to meaningfully address this issue.

Understandably, the responsibility to make changes to the referral process and subsequent placement into special education is not attributed solely to school counselors. Instead, the above eight strategies offers ways in which school counselors and school administrators can best advocate for the educational needs of African American male youth.

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