

“It’s like he’ll be there for you”: Middle School African American Males’ Stories of Effective Professional School Counselors

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In this phenomenological study, a sample (5) of adolescent middle school African American males discuss the characteristics their professional school counselors demonstrated that made them feel supported and nurtured. Themes were generated from data in a larger study where participants articulated that effective school counselors were humane professionals who, among other things, made themselves available to students, and were knowledgeable about those students. Following the findings, recommendations for professional school counselor educators and pre-service school counseling students are provided. The manuscript concludes with the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: African American males, professional school counseling, multicultural school counseling

Visual and written depictions of African American males as misguided, socially irresponsible, educationally uninterested and potentially dangerous, are deeply entrenched and commonplace within American culture (Dancy, 2014; Henfield, 2012; Howard, 2013; Washington, 2015). Over time, these images and narratives about the presumed deviancy of African American males have infiltrated every conceivable American social institution and been used to rationalize the surveillance and segregation of African American male bodies (Alexander, 2012; hooks, 2004; Howard, Flenbaugh, & Terry, 2012; Muhammad, 2010). A plethora of conceptual manuscripts, and empirical and anecdotal data expound on how the prevailing stereotypes about African American males frame how members of law enforcement, educators, and society, at large, perceive African American males on the whole (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Goff et al., 2014; Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010; Lundy & Mazama, 2014; Welch, 2007).

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The implications of these pejorative characterizations on African American males' holistic functioning (e.g., psychosocial, physical health, etc.) across the lifespan can be profound (Harrell, et al., 2011; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). It is particularly disheartening when we witness these deficit-laden narratives being projected indiscriminately onto African American male children and adolescents well before they enter adulthood in ways that drastically alter their life trajectories (Goff, et al., 2014; Jenkins, 2006; Kunjufu, 2005). Here, Ladson-Billings (2011) elaborates on the stereotype ascription phenomenon in relation to African American males and how it occurs in society and American schools:

The paradox of Black boys' experiences in school and society is that mainstream perceptions of them vacillate between making them babies and making them men. When they are somewhere between the ages of three and six years they are acknowledged as cute but rarely intellectually capable. . . . This notion of little Black boys as cute does not last long. Before long they are moved to a category that resembles criminals. Their childhood evaporates before they are eight or nine-years-old when teachers and other school officials begin to think of them as 'men.' The fear and control previously referenced appears to be activated and the once 'cute' boys become problematic 'men.' (p. 10)

As educational and socializing institutions, schools should, ideally, be inviting and convey a belief that all students, irrespective of their racial or ethnic identification or socioeconomic status, possess the ability to think critically, internalize information, and achieve academically (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). Unfortunately, as Ladson-Billings' comments suggest, this is not how many African American males experience education.

Rather than being seen through a prism of boundless potential and possibility, African American males are often cloaked in a veil of sympathy and suspiciousness (Ford & Moore, 2013; Henfield, 2013; Warren, 2013). Perceived as barriers and threats to the attainment of their schools' educational missions, it should come as no surprise that African American males often feel alienated within schools (Howard, 2013), leading some to disengage and depart before graduation (Schulz & Rubel, 2011). In light of the adverse implications stereotypical projections can have on the social and educational development of young African American males, Ladson-Billings (2011), Kunjufu (2005) and others (e.g., Warren, 2013; Washington, 2010) encourage educational adults, including professional school counselors, to forge constructive and affirming relationships with African American male students. By avoiding stereotypes, professional school counselors communicate to African American male students that their presence in schools is valued and that they matter (Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010).

Professional school counselors are charged with being unbiased and using culturally relevant counseling interventions that engender productive relationships with African American male students (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Lee, 1995; Lee & Bailey, 1997; Washington, 2010). By creating comprehensive culturally relevant school counseling programs, professional school counselors can provide multifaceted guidance and counseling services (e.g., classroom guidance, individual and group counseling) African American males are more likely to access.

Multicultural School Counseling Competencies

Facilitating healthy relationships with culturally different students is extremely relevant to counseling in general (Sue & Sue, 2013) and school counseling in particular (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2011). Never has the issue of multicultural school counseling competence been more pressing than the present time. Demographically, the school counseling profession consists primarily of adults who are much less racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse than the students they encounter and serve (Bemak & Chung, 2004; Muller, 2002; White & Rayle, 2007). As the country's K-12 student population becomes more racially and ethnically heterogeneous, K-12 school counselors are, overwhelming, racially homogeneous; therefore, it is imperative that professional school counselors envisage and implement strategies that enable them to cultivate relationships with diverse students, especially with students like African American males who have traditionally experienced educational marginalization (The Education Trust, 2007).

Additionally, professional school counselors have been implored to assume a more active and decisive role in promoting positive academic and social outcomes for adolescent African American male students (Booth & Washington, 2015; Corbin & Pruitt, 1999; Washington, 2010). School counselor multicultural competencies can serve as a valuable resource in developing a fruitful rapport with African American male students that leads to these types of outcomes (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011). By exhibiting a nonjudgmental posture, utilizing culturally relevant strategies, and advocating for educational equity, it is believed professional school counselors can nurture the overall development of African American male students (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

With the exception of a few articles, there is presently a dearth of professional school counseling literature that examines the types of strategies professional school counselors use to cultivate productive counseling relationships with African American male students. The limited extant professional school counseling literature that does examine this topic can be assigned to one or more of the following categories: literature describing the focus of the counseling services rendered (i.e., educational, personal/social, and/or career exploration/decision making); literature that analyzes the frequency with which these services are rendered; and examinations of African American males' level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the quality of the services they receive (e.g., Bryan & Gallant, 2012; Owens, Simmons, Bryant, & Henfield, 2011). Despite the inherent value of this work, research that focuses on how professional school counselors establish meaningful counseling relationships with African American adolescent males in general, and especially during middle school, is extremely sparse. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to highlight and underscore the factors that enabled a sample of middle school African American males to forge constructive relationships with their professional school counselors.

The data presented here represents one of the five themes generated from a larger study (Washington, 2013). While the larger study was a qualitative examination of participants' perceptions, experiences, thoughts and ideas about their interactions with school counselors (e.g., the role of school counselors, effective and ineffective performance of the school counselor role, expectations of the school counselor, etc.), this article focuses exclusively on the variables that contributed to the creation of a functional counseling relationship between the participants and

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their school counselors, and how school counselors used these relationships to demonstrate their support for the participants' overall development.

Methodology

To reiterate, the findings presented here are part of a larger study, which sought to explore how a sample of five middle school African American adolescent males would describe their perceptions of and experiences with professional school counselors (Washington, 2013). Here, though, focus will be paid to the nature of the relationship school counselors were able to establish with the participants. Since the focus of the study was exploring and detailing participants' perceptions and experiences with these relationships, a phenomenological qualitative research methodology was utilized.

Phenomenological Qualitative Research

The purpose of phenomenological research is to gain greater insight into how individuals establish a sense of understanding about particular lived experiences (Patton, 2002). Phenomenological research invites participants to discuss, in detail, an experience or set of experiences, analyzes how participants think about these experiences, and identifies core components that exist across descriptions (Hays & Wood, 2011). Here, phenomenological research was used because the purpose of the study was to understand how a group of middle school African American male students would describe the meaning, content, and most basic components of their counseling interactions with their professional school counselors. To better understand how this sample of middle school African American males experienced and perceived their school counselors, the following research questions were posed during two separate individual interviews that lasted, on average, for 45 minutes:

1. How do African American adolescent male middle school students describe the purpose of school counseling?
2. How do African American adolescent male middle school students describe their expectations of their school counselor(s)?
3. How do African American adolescent male middle school students describe their experiences with the school counselor(s)?
4. How do African American adolescent male students evaluate their school counselors' performance?
5. How do African American adolescent males believe their decision to speak with their school counselor would be perceived by their peer group?
6. How do African American adolescent males believe their decision to speak with their school counselor would be perceived by their family?

Participant Selection

Conversations with prospective research sites did not begin until approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) had been received. Upon receiving IRB approval, the researcher contacted the Pastor of a Baptist church in southeastern state. A description of the research study was given to the Pastor to review; after reviewing this description, the Pastor allowed the researcher to make a brief presentation about the study to members of his

congregation. This church was identified to achieve convenient and purposeful sampling. A sample of convenience was sought because financial constraints (researcher was unemployed at the time of data collection) prevented the researcher from traveling significant distances to collect data. With regard to purposeful sampling, this church was selected because the congregation is almost entirely African American and was, therefore, presumed to have a sufficient supply of worshippers who would satisfy all of the research criteria (e.g., identify as a male, African American middle school student with a minimum of two counseling interactions with their school counselors).

Participants were screened if they volunteered to participate after the presentation to the congregation was made. Several students and their parents or guardians expressed interest in the study by providing their contact information. Ten prospective participants and their parents or guardians were identified. However, this number dwindled to five after it was revealed that five of these prospective participants possessed some but not all of the prerequisite research criteria; five adolescents were disqualified from consideration because although they were in middle school and identified as African American and male, they did not have the minimum number (two) of counseling interactions with their school counselors in the current or previous academic year. Because this study sought to explore participants' perceptions about and experiences with their school counselors, actual counselor contacts were an obvious prerequisite for participation.

Trustworthiness, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability of the Findings

Several measures were taken to increase the trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings of this qualitative research study. First, the researcher engaged in bracketing. During bracketing the researcher makes a conscious effort to prevent preconceived notions about the phenomenon under investigation from tainting the data analysis process (Hays & Wood, 2011). Bracketing was utilized in this study so the findings would authentically reflect how the participants thought and felt about their experiences with their school counselors.

Second, three approaches to triangulation were used in this study. The data participants provided during the individual and follow-up interviews was triangulated with web-based information about their schools and their guidance/counseling departments (e.g., mission statements, parent newsletters). Additionally, participants' comments about the frequency of their contact with their school counselor and the purpose for those interactions were compared to the responses they provided on the demographic questionnaire/survey they completed prior to the initial individual interview. Member checking and investigator triangulation (i.e., peer debriefing, external auditors) were also used to determine if the participants' comments had been properly interpreted¹. Methodological triangulation was achieved in this study through the face-to-face initial and follow-up interviews with participants and the demographic questionnaire. To enhance the transferability, dependability and confirmability of this study's findings, the researcher relied on the participants' own thick quotes, and maintained an audit trail throughout

¹ Communication with the peer debriefer and external auditors occurred by email and by phone. Both external auditors are Assistant Professors of Counselor Education and Supervision; at the time the study was conducted one was employed at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in Georgia, the other at a large Predominantly White institution (PWI) in Virginia.

the data collection and data analysis processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989)².

Findings

During the initial and follow-up interviews, participants discussed the obligations and responsibilities they associated with the professional school counselor position. Participants also differentiated between effective and ineffective performance of this role. According to the participants, the effective school counselor was a professional who acted in ways that engendered constructive relationships with students.

Knowledge of the students and being there for them

Jay³ distinguished effective counselors from their ineffective counterparts by saying the former, “the real good ones”, “get to know all the kids, they’ll know what’s they problems, they’ll know they records, and they’ll get to know, know’em exactly as much as they get to know.” Jay continued by saying “it’s like he’ll be there for you. If he knows it’s a situation that you really didn’t do that you got caught up in, he’ll be right there with you.” Moreover:

I told myself . . . since he’s a counselor, he posed [sic] to be the person who helps you with problems, if he’s a counselor he supposed to have, he supposed to be there with you for anything you go through, if he’s there he supposed to help you between any situation; if it’s big or small, he supposed to be there. So if I have a problem with home or something he should be there too, because if it’s affecting my school or my grades or anything, he should be there to help me to get better so I can strive better in life.

In fact, Jay said his relationship with his school counselor had grown to such an extent that it was almost as if the school counselor knew what he might do in a situation before it actually occurs:

A person who’s, he’s there, he knows me, he knows how I am, he knows how I’ll be, he knows, he knows me before I do things. If I’m in a situation he already knows how I’m going to respond or act in that situation, he helps me calm down that situation or that problem.

² The audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for this study consisted of research data (audio taped interviews and demographic questionnaire findings); data reduction and analysis (the researcher’s field notes made during and immediately following the initial and follow-up interviews and transcribed interview data); data reconstruction and synthesis (preliminary meaning units and codes, feedback from external auditors and peer debriefer); process notes (Email correspondences with prospective research site contacts, dissertation advisors, and external auditors, Institutional Review Board and informed consent documentation, demographic questionnaire, interview transcriptions, meaning making units and coding documents, bank statements documenting purchase of gift card incentives, audio recording of interviews were all maintained as process notes); and intentions (intentions and expectations about and for this study have been communicated through the lay summary, dissertation proposal, Institutional Review Board proposal to the following entities and individuals: Institutional Review Board Committee, prospective research site contacts (e.g., Pastor), prospective and eventual research participants, parents and guardians).

³ Pseudonyms used in place of participants’ actual names.

Instillation of confidence

Effective school counselors are a source of motivation and support for students who are pursuing their academic and professional goals. Here Jay talks about how vital this support is in becoming the person he wants to become:

I expect them [school counselors] to always trust and believe, and believe in all their patients, or in their students, and always have faith in them, and to always, to always, we'll have they back or be with them . . . he would have my back say if he know, he know I did something bad, he wouldn't end the conflict, he will come and help me get out of it. . . . They can go to the point to where I should be able to tell him and then he supposed to be the counselor. That's one reason why I'm not afraid or I didn't have to built [sic] up the courage to tell him because he should be the school counselor, that's what he there for.

Jay goes on to talk about how his school counselor's support helps him pursue the most sublime goals by assessing his strengths and areas of improvement:

to be better, to exceed the parts where I can exceed. To see if, where my, my weakness and strengths are. If I have a problem to get better at that problem, to make that problem disappear. To get the solution of it or to get where I can, to get to where I can strive so much, I can strive so much where I can't strive no more, to get to the highest I can be. If I can get to a, if I can be a superstar, get higher than a superstar, to try to strive better. Or get higher than Oprah Winfrey.

Positive and friendly demeanor

The effective school counselor was also seen as someone possessing a positive and warm disposition. Jay talks about the importance of positivity here:

I want someone to express their emotions but be good with it too, positive attitude with it. Cause a teacher, she can go any way with it, she can go her way or she or she can get mad or she can get or she can get happy with it. But I want a person who can get happy with it and get me to strive better. To be my, like my best friend, basically like, like my friend that always stick up for me. Who always help me through thick and thin.

Another student, Hines, offered his opinion on the attributes demonstrated by the effective school counselor:

I expect my school counselor, not to act as my friend, but to help me, like act as, like somebody who, who can help you . . . You know, not your buddy, like, but like, friend and stuff like that, I mean he's older than you but like to act as your friend . . . be there when you need him or her.

Additionally, participants thought a solid school counselor/student relationship resembles other comfortable relationships they already maintained. This is reflected in Nathan's comments about his experiences with a woman and man who served as his counselor and Jay's discussion of his experiences with his male counselor:

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Nathan:

She's like, ah, I can say Ms. Norris is like a friend...So like um yea she's like a friend; like, like for my friends, my friends, me and my friends we don't have no problems, we like real cool, like, so that's what, that's what we, that's what kind of connection I have with my counselor, we're like very cool.

I'm like, like best friend type. Like, like, say like cause he [school counselor] probably say he's just a teacher. I don't want him to be a teacher, I want him to be my buddy, my pal or my comrade.

Jay:

he can be my, sorta, kinda like my friend . . . how school counselor supposed to be and how they are, really they like my best friend to me, so they really good how they are... to be like my friend and he won't be my enemy, he, he, he'll be somewhere I can feel like I'm at home with or who I feel at ease.

Trust and faith in them

Trust and faith were instrumental in the development of a healthy school counselor/student dynamic. Jay talks about how his school counselor demonstrates his trust and faith, and how this trust and faith represent the school counselor's conviction that he will do what he is supposed to do:

he got trust in me and faith in me, I shouldn't let him down by doing something wrong or going out in the street and acting bad, because that, then he'll have a second thought about me and then lose his hope on me. . . . That comes from the trust in both of the persons, the trust, the confidence . . . his trust in me interacts with the personal relationship between each other.

Because the school counselor has invested trust, faith and confidence in Jay, Jay feels compelled to reciprocate the effort by being "better and have a better relationship with him." Consequently, Jay does not entertain the idea of engaging in inappropriate behaviors or activities (e.g., "I'm doing good in school, but once I get outside, I'm in a gang and all that,") because Jay does not:

want him to get a bad aspect of me, or, or, um perception of me . . . like I won't, like I won't really, do nothing really wrong, to trust me that I will do my best that I can do to trust me to do my work and to trust me to, to, to get, do, do the hardest I can. To don't have a doubt about me.

So, because Jay perceives that his school counselor trusts him and is invested in him as a person and student, he avoids negativity because negativity might compromise, or threaten outright, the integrity of the relationship he has established with his school counselor.

Discussion

For the participants in this study, a school counselor's positive personal attributes (e.g., trustworthiness, etc.), their familiarity with students and availability are of the utmost importance. Participants attached tremendous significance to the aforementioned school

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counselor characteristics because they represent the epicenter from which all other aspects of the school counselor/student dynamic emanate. To this point, Brown (1999) believes school counselors should assist in the creation of schools where adults “know students’ names, recognize their efforts, and provide academic support” because “those who do not care, fail to listen, and refuse to recognize individual differences in achievement potential contribute to the alienation of students” (p. 1).

With regard to how the school counselor/student relationship is fostered, a number of different strategies were identified. Participants appreciated when their school counselors expressed trust in them and are trustworthy themselves (e.g., confidential), and when school counselors instill confidence in their ability to succeed no matter how daunting their goals may appear to others. This reflects previous research findings where school-aged students discussed how certain attributes (i.e., a sense of caring) contributed to their decision to seek out certain adult-based professionals over others (Baylis, Collins & Coleman, 2011; Lindsey & Kalafat, 1998; Saunders & Saunders, 2001; West, Kayser, Overton & Saltmarsh, 1991). Pre-service and in-service professional school counselors should be cognizant of these variables when working with middle school African American male students. Recommendations on how these things can be addressed with school counselors and school counseling students are provided below.

Recommendations

Although the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all middle school African American males, middle school professional school counselors or how these two groups relate to one another, insights from this study are germane to the school counselor preparation processes. These insights are listed here.

School Counselor Education

Participants in this study talked frequently about how the term/role “school counselor” is simply a title through which an adult’s personal attributes (e.g., “nice”, “hard”, “swag”, etc.) are made manifest. School counselor educators can reiterate the importance of self-inventory and self-assessment to school counseling students as these factors are likely to be perceived by the students they will eventually work with (Guindon, 2010).

For school counseling students, this means thinking intentionally about how they have been socialized to perceive non-whites (Katz, 1985), and especially African American males (Howard, 2013; Howard, Flennaugh, & Terry, 2012; Toporek, 2013). For school counseling students this entails a recognition that:

most of us in the United States (both White persons and individuals who belong to ethnic minority groups) were socialized to view Black male adolescents and adults as inferior and dangerous, stereotypes that have negative and in some cases deadly consequences for Black male adolescents and adults and other ethnic minorities. (Dale & Daniel, 2013, p. 39-40)

Acknowledging this socialization is significant because it assists school counseling students and practicing school counselors in conceptualizing ethnically diverse students’ concerns within a social context (Booth & Washington, 2015; Dale & Daniel, 2013) and helps strengthen the

counselor-client relationship (Day-Vines, et al., 2007). Moreover, by thinking about the sociopolitical realities that precipitated the way they see themselves and ethnically diverse students, school counseling students and school counselors take essential steps towards becoming multiculturally competent social justice advocates (Griffin & Steen, 2011; Hatch & Lewis, 2011; Ratts et al., 2015; The Education Trust, 2007).

In addition to broaching discussion about multicultural competence, it is also important for counselor educators to converse with school counseling students about strategies for rapport building with African American male students. Findings from this study revealed that rapport building with middle school African American youth depends greatly upon school counselors' ability to avoid seeing adolescent African American males through deficit-oriented lenses (Dale & Daniel, 2013; Herr & Erford, 2011).

Post Master's Training

With respect to school counseling interactions and interventions with middle school-aged African American adolescent males, post-master's training provides opportunities for school counselors to remain abreast of innovative culturally relevant counseling approaches, strategies and techniques that are shown to pay tangible dividends with this student group (Harper, Terry, & Twiggs, 2009). In addition to presentations provided at national and regional conferences, membership in professional counseling organizations (e.g., American School Counselor Association, American Counseling Association), can contribute to professional school counselors' knowledge of issues relating to adolescent African American males while also providing collaboration and consultation opportunities (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011). Because promoting the success of ethnically diverse students often requires difficult conversations around racial inequities that can produce negative personal and professional implications (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahan, 2010), collaborating with others can stimulate ideas, and mitigate negative repercussions.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Because the primary focus of this phenomenological study was to hear how participants perceived and described their experiences with school counseling, school counselors were not consulted about the nature of the services they provided or how they believe those services were perceived or assessed by the participants in this study. Future qualitative studies could employ grounded theory or ethnographic approaches to question school counselors about their interactions with middle school African American adolescent males to identify points of convergence and divergence. Future research might also assess which of the school counselor relationship building attributes or ways of being middle school African American males find most significant. Quantitative studies could be undertaken to identify and discern which variables impact African American adolescent males' perceptions of their school counselors (e.g., racial identity, conformity/adherence to masculine gender norms, acculturation, etc.) most or how these variables interact with one another.

Conclusion

Professional school counselors can be essential cogs in promoting students' personal, social, and academic development, and career exploration. For the African American male participants in this study, their school counselors performed their professional duties in a way that contributed to their chances of obtaining the lives they aspire to. Participants were satisfied with the services they received from their professional school counselors, which buttresses the argument that school counselors have much to offer African American male students particularly when appropriate rapport building measures are taken. Given the alienation and isolation African American males often experience in American schools (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Noguera, 2009; Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010), professional school counselors have to seriously examine how they forge relationships with this student group so that they can support their short and long-term endeavors.

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