School-Family-Community Collaboration for African American Males with Disabilities

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For many individuals, work is an integral component of daily life (Koch, 2000) that serves several functions, with economic support being chief among them. Work can also have a major impact on one's self-image, feelings of self-worth, and social status, meaning that it has an essential role in satisfying basic human needs (Maslow, 1943, 1954; Szymanski, Enright, & Hershenson, 2012). Unfortunately, throughout history, individuals with learning disabilities have experienced barriers to higher education and postsecondary employment opportunities. For African American males with learning disabilities, these barriers include the disenfranchisement precipitated by the cumulative effects of exposure to racism. To date, there is only a small body of literature addressing these individuals and their unique needs, with much of it focused on those in the ivory tower as opposed to on-the-ground stakeholders. The purpose of this article, then, is to present the current literature, and use a vignette to highlight and illustrate how culturally sensitive school-family-community collaborations (SFC) can facilitate positive outcomes for African American males with learning disabilities.

Keywords: African American males, school-family-community partnerships, learning disability

Introduction

Public discourse is replete with details publicizing the dire straits of African American boys and men in comparison with other members of society. As Robinson (2013) aptly articulated, and shared in other articles in this special issue, an analysis of scholarship on African American males in K-12 environments uncovers several core themes including under-representation in gifted and Advanced Placement programs, over-representation in special education programs, and high rates of school suspensions and expulsions.

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Moreover, individuals with disabilities are significantly over-represented in juvenile correctional facilities (Hogan, Bullock, & Fritsch, 2010) and over 50% receive benefits from governmental programs (Brault, 2012). One of the most often cited educational barriers facing African American males is their over-representation in special education and how often they are mislabeled as emotionally disturbed and intellectually disabled.

The U.S. Department of Labor (2012) indicated that individuals with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and earn, on average, one million dollars less over a lifespan than a person without a disability and a high school diploma. According to Banks (2014), "as a whole, these occurrences result in inequitable educational opportunities, higher unemployment rates among individuals with disabilities, and loss of significant economic capital within the United States" (p. 28). Schools, families, and communities are the primary contexts responsible for determining life outcomes (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007).

This fact is especially important for youth with disabilities between the ages of 16-18. Research suggests parent, family and community involvement within schools increases high school students' academic and postsecondary success (Van Roekel, 2008). In addition, collaboration among schools, families, and communities allow for services and interventions to be presented in a manner that promotes success for youth with disabilities (Plotner, Trach, Oertle, & Fleming, 2014). Despite the benefits of collaboration related to postsecondary outcomes among youth with disabilities, these entities often fail to work collaboratively, leaving students unprepared for their transition from the secondary educational setting (Lamb, 2007; Plotner et al., 2014).

As such, it makes sense that in order to meet the needs of African American males with disabilities; each of these spaces must be thought of as not only part of the issue, but also part of the solution. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explain the value of culturally sensitive school-family-community collaboration in facilitating positive outcomes for African American males with learning disabilities.

African American Males with Learning Disabilities and Postsecondary Options

According to Blustein (2008), work meets three primary needs in people's lives: (a) the need for survival, (b) the need for relatedness, and (c) the need for self-determination. Bluestein also believes work is central to the development and maintenance of our psychological health. Unfortunately, unequal access to work prevents many from satisfying these primary needs. This is especially true for people with disabilities. Although policies and interventions (e.g., transitions programs) to improve employment outcomes of youth with disabilities certainly exist (Doren, Yan, & Tu, 2013; Gold, Fabian, & Luecking, 2013; IDEA, 2004) disparities in rates of employment between youth with disabilities and their nondisabled counterparts persist (Gold et al., 2013).

Racial and ethnic minority youth with disabilities continue to obtain employment at rates lower than their White counterparts with disabilities (Balcazar, 2012; Greene, 2014; Gold et al., 2013). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), African American youth with disabilities (ages 16 and above) accounted for 21.6% of the unemployed population, which was higher than Hispanics (16.1%), Whites (11.2%), and Asians (8.6%). According to Balcazar (2012), data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2, 2005) indicated that 40% out-of-school ethnic minority young adults with disabilities were employed, compared to

63% of White youth; specifically, rates were 42% for African American and 36% for Latino youth (Balcazar, 2012).

Educational attainment is particularly salient for individuals with disabilities because data indicates that those who pursue postsecondary education will likely achieve long-lasting careers and avoid low-skilled minimum wage jobs (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005). Unfortunately, large disparities in postsecondary enrollment between African American students and European American youth with disabilities exist (Newman, et al., 2011). Even worse, when African American males successfully complete college, they continue to confront considerable hurdles when attempting to enter the labor market (Henfield & McGee, 2012). One plausible reason for the lower employment rates experienced by African American males with disabilities is limited social capital. Stanton-Salazar (1997) defined social capital as a form of symbolic currency people accrue when they forge successful relationships with powerful individuals and influential networks and institutions; this symbolic currency often materializes literal economic capital in the future.

African Americans often have lower social capital due to limited access to gainful employment and to prominent social networks that might advance their position (Harper, 2008). When African American males with learning disabilities do not have access to competitive employment or educational requirements that will increase their social capital, they have limited opportunities for upward mobility within educational spaces and the workforce. Thus, providing information and access to opportunities is essential to increase the social capital of African American males with learning disabilities in addition to their employment rates. Limited education, particularly postsecondary education, however, adversely affects individuals with disabilities' ability to secure gainful employment, make career advancements, and enjoy overall quality of life (Banks, 2014).

Given the numerous unique transition barriers encountered by African American males with learning disabilities, investigations into interventions that promote partnerships among key stakeholders are necessary to combat dismal postsecondary outcomes. In the following section, we explore school-family-community (SFC) collaborations as a possible solution to the less than conditions African American males with disabilities encounter as they prepare for their postsecondary futures.

School-Family-Community Collaborations and African American Males

African American male students experience a myriad of barriers as they attempt to transition into their postsecondary futures; however, many professionals, the authors included, believe school-family-community collaborations can mitigate the deleterious impact these barriers have on racial and ethnic minority students' immediate and postsecondary pursuits (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010; Starobin & Bivens, 2014; Washington, 2010). With respect to the postsecondary transition opportunities and outcomes for African American males with learning disabilities, the need for school-family-community collaborations are even more imperative.

According to Bryan and Henry (2012), school-family-community partnerships are "collaborative initiatives and relationships among school personnel, family members, and community members and representatives of community-based organizations such as universities, businesses, religious organizations, libraries, and mental health and social service agencies . . .

that build strengths and resilience in children to enhance their academic, personal, social and college-career outcomes" (pp. 408-409).

To maximize effectiveness and productivity, Bryan and Henry's (2012) comprehensive model of school-family-community partnerships encourages horizontal and democratic relationships between human helpers and the students, families, and communities they serve. This model for effective school-family-community partnerships matures and evolves through the following stages: 1). Preparing to Partner: Where do I begin?; 2). Assessing Needs and Strengths: How do I identify the goals of the partnership?; 3). Coming Together: How do I bring partners together?; 4). Creating Shared Vision and Plan: How do I get everyone on board and on the same page?; 5). Taking Action: What will we do and how?; 6). Evaluating and Celebrating Progress: How will I measure our success?; and 7) Maintaining Momentum: How will I sustain this partnership?

Informed by Bryan and Henry's (2012) model, the authors contend collaborations between schools, families, and community agencies are believed to be particularly beneficial for students experiencing "poverty, social exclusion, social isolation, and other challenging conditions" (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010, p. 160). Predicated on the belief school-family-community partnerships maximize students' personal, social, academic, and college-career talents, especially disenfranchised students, educational and community leaders are encouraged to connect and collaborate as consistently as possible (Bryan & Henry, 2012).

Collaboration between state and local educational agencies and families helps increase educational equity and access to postsecondary opportunities for students with disabilities. However, many state and local educational agencies remain isolated (IDEA, 2004), despite clear directives about the necessity for collaboration between local and state agencies to support successful postsecondary transitions for students with disabilities. Even worse, agency isolation persists, despite empirical evidence supporting collaboration between secondary educational settings, postsecondary educational settings, mental health and vocational rehabilitation agencies is essential to the postsecondary personal, social, academic and career and college aspirations and successes of students with disabilities (Lindstrom, Doren, & Miesch, 2011; Oertle & Seader, 2015).

The most salient barriers to school-family-community collaboration around matters of special education include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) poor perceptions of outside agencies by school staff, students, and parents, and of schools and students by agency staff; (b) nonexistent or ineffective procedures for collaboration of school and agency staff throughout the referral, eligibility, determination, and transition planning process; and (c) financial constraints (Li, 2004).

Given the aforementioned, it should be clear that school-family-community collaborations must not be culturally encapsulated or culturally insensitive. On the contrary, these collaborations and transition planning should respond to the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of African American males (Cote, Jones, Sparks, & Aldridge, 2012; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010), which are often underemphasized or ignored completely (Trainor, 2008). In other words, postsecondary transition plans that are germane to and reflect the ideals, values, and belief systems of Africa American males and their families typify culturally responsive school-family-community collaborations. Through culturally responsive school-family-community collaborations, human helpers can avoid rigid adherence to an individualistic cultural orientation, which may not reflect the collectivistic values to which some African American males subscribe (Antosh, 2013; Carson, 2009). Instead, school-family-community collaborations around

successful postsecondary transitions for African American males with disabilities would enlist familial input, incorporate their strengths and preferences, and provide explicit information about transition-related decisions (Trainor, 2005).

Vignette Discussion

In order to facilitate successful school-family-community partnerships, it is important that literature designed to shed light on the topic does not narrowly target scholars in the ivory tower as an audience. Instead, it is just as important, if not more important to take aim at individuals working in these contexts who may be more interested in clearly articulated examples of successful partnerships. For that reason, in this section, we include a vignette that will serve as an example for readers in- and outside higher education settings.

Marcus

Marcus is a rising senior in a medium-sized graduating class in a large southern metropolitan city who was identified as having a learning (reading) disability in elementary school and has been receiving assistance and educational accommodations ever since. Although Marcus's parents were initially fearful that his being identified as having a learning disability would lead to his being stigmatized, they have worked closely with the school counselor, the school psychologist, and representatives from other service delivery agencies in his immediate and extended community.

Marcus receives comprehensive in-school and employment preparation services through a local vocational rehabilitation center. At school, Marcus receives accommodations that assist him in taking notes that are more effective and committing more content to memory. Additionally, Marcus receives time extensions when he takes exams and has the option to take exams in a secluded location away from classmates. As part of his Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Marcus receives valuable vocational training, which includes career and college exploration opportunities. Rather than keeping them in the dark, Marcus's service providers, acting in the spirit of respectful school-family-community collaboration, consistently confer with him and his parents regarding next-step decisions throughout the planning process.

Post-graduation, Marcus secured employment with a local business as a receptionist while he simultaneously took classes at a nearby technical college. Marcus selected this technical college for a variety of reasons. First, Marcus and his parents believed the small class sizes and more reasonable student-to-teacher ratios would provide an ideal learning environment, unlike the larger state schools. Second, this technical school had developed a local and regional reputation for its diverse academic programs and the array of outstanding student support services they provide through their Office of Student Affairs.

Student Affairs staff, through their responsiveness, work with faculty to ensure students receive the accommodations that address their unique learning styles and needs. One program that Marcus finds particularly appealing is dedicated to interrupting the pattern of premature attrition by providing academic and career mentorship to incoming African American male students. Third, Marcus also saw this technical college as an ideal fit because of its close proximity to his city of origin, which allows consistent and ongoing contact with his immediate and extended family. Marcus and his family are overjoyed with his postsecondary decision and

attribute much of his success to the partnerships they were able to forge with the educational agencies that supported him throughout high school.

Discussion

When we think about how school-family-community collaborations (SFC) helped Marcus, there are a number of important points to consider. First, it is important to appreciate how the members of this partnership leveraged critical pieces of federal legislation to help him realize his post-secondary educational and occupational dreams. In terms of significance in assisting students like Marcus, Stodden and Mruzek (2010) suggest:

The most groundbreaking of these federal policies include: (1) the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 (Public Law 108-446), which focuses on quality preparation in secondary school and transition to postsecondary education and employment; (2) the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as amended in 2008 (Public Law 110-335), which focuses on providing reasonable accommodations to ensure equal access to learning and work environments; and (3) the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-112), which provides financial assistance and training support leading to quality employment (p. 1).

From the vignette, we see how the enforcement of these laws was essential to Marcus's educational welfare; we can also envision how these laws help countless other students with their identified educational needs. In other words, it is essential for school counselors, other educational personnel, and community entities to be knowledgeable about these laws and effectively communicate them to students and their families. Obliviousness to these laws can have negative implications on students' performance, but also lead to severe legal repercussions (Dollarhide & Saginak 2012).

A second variable to consider is how the professionals participating in the school-family-community collaboration to support Marcus's educational and career ambitions were cognizant of the cultural factors associated with his situation. It is important, indeed, that professionals who work collaboratively with African American students and their parents and families be attuned to cultural factors and how they impact decision-making (Banks, 2014). Effective school-family-community collaboration with African American male students with disabilities should be respectful and culturally relevant in how they connect students to resources that help them to pursue their goals (Kochhar-Bryant, 2008).

For example, we witness this in the vignette when Marcus's parents candidly expressed their fears about the stigmatization they thought might occur with their son. Rather than summarily dismissing these concerns with little regard or consideration, the members of culturally relevant school-family-community collaborations would recognize and validate these fears because stigmatization has been known to impede African American students in reaching their full potential (Banks, 2014). In addition, although it did not occur in this vignette, it might be important to unpack the shame and embarrassment that prevents African American students with disabilities from disclosing their disability or leads them to wait until they receive a failing grade before they seek the supports they need (Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004). In circumstances such as these it would behoove the partnership to understand the intersectional nature of racial identity and disability status as they many have "deleterious psychological consequences for postsecondary African American students with disabilities" (Durodoye et al., 2004, as quoted by Banks, 2014, p. 30).

Because African American males with disabilities are often unaware of community resources and agencies that might help them overcome the myriad postsecondary educational and occupational challenges they face (Pellegrino, Sermons, & Shaver, 2011; Trainor, 2005), we believe culturally relevant school-family-community collaborations with African American males with disabilities and their families are of paramount importance.

School-family-community collaboration can help dissipate the many pressures associated with decision-making processes that youth with disabilities and their families often face. Effective initiation and adequate nurturance of school-family-community collaborations affords students and their families access to community resources and plan for employment, educational and independent living opportunities (Baker & Stahl, 2004).

Conclusion

Effective school-family-community collaborations with African American male students and their families acknowledge cultural considerations and ameliorate barriers that might hinder these students from achieving postsecondary occupational and educational success (Noonan, Morningstar & Erickson, 2008). The culturally relevant school-family-community collaborations discussed in this paper and illustrated in the vignette, rest on the fundamental premise that a lack of access to resources and information, and not an absence of ability or ambition, explain why many African American male students with disabilities fall short of accomplishing their postsecondary educational and occupational endeavors (Kiyama, 2010). Through culturally relevant school-family-community partnerships, professionals and families can work collaboratively to erode impediments and to nurture the talents of African American male students with disabilities (Banks, 2014).

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