

Preparing School Counselors to Work with At-risk African American Students

by

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Abstract

Schools have the large responsibility of educating and promoting academic achievement for all students. Throughout the United States, schools see students with different ability levels, cultural backgrounds, and family lives. With this in mind, some students are at-risk of school failure because of factors in their environment that impedes academic success. This paper will review the literature, specifically, pertaining to African American students who are considered at-risk. Additionally, it discusses the important roles a school counselor plays in promoting academic success and providing support to at-risk African American students. To prepare school counselor to work with this population of students, it is imperative that they are informed about the cultural, environmental and school factors that contribute to students' academic struggles, as well as the need to address cultural competencies and techniques to work with at-risk African American students and their families. Lastly, it looks at the important roles of school counselor as well as academia in the training of future pupil service providers.

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Finally, for all those students who are considered at-risk... I am confident you can do anything you want in this world. This is for you, in hopes you too understand how much you inspire me and how much I believe in you.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	2
Chapter I: Introduction.....	5
Statement of the Problem.....	8
Purpose of the Study	9
Assumptions of the Study	9
Definition of Terms.....	10
Limitations of the Study.....	10
Chapter II: Literature Review	12
Issues at Glance	12
Contributing Environmental Factors	13
Factors Impacting School Success	16
Systematic School Counseling Programs.....	20
School Counselor Competencies	21
Empowering Students: Promoting Self-Confidence	23
Suggestions for Working with Students and Their Families	26
The Role of Training Programs and Academia.....	28
Chapter III: Summary, Critical Analysis, and Recommendations.....	33
Summary	33
Critical Analysis	35
Conclusion and Recommendations	38
References.....	40

Chapter I: Introduction

Schools across the country have the common goal of educating students. At the same time, each school experiences a unique environment and demographic of students (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2009). As schools educate such an array of students, it is vital for educators and support staff to be competent in working in a plethora of communities, school systems, and with diverse groups of students. School counselors, personnel, and other service providers need to be able to assist student needs in academics, future planning, and mental health concerns (NCES, 2009). In order to be successful, school personnel must have a wealth of knowledge and skills to help all students reach the set levels and standards of academic achievement.

Schools are continuing to become more racially and ethnically diverse. In 2006, racial/ethnic student distributions in public schools were 1.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 17.1% African American, 20.5% Hispanic, and 56.5 % European American (NCES, 2009). Increased diversity in schools means that school personnel must be aware of the challenges and types of support individual students need. Research has shown (e.g. Gopaul-McNicol, 2001; Lee, 2005; Lee & Wagner, 2007) that minority groups are increasingly at-risk for school failure. Students who are considered to be at-risk are in danger of academic failure due to barriers in their surrounding environments which include; poverty, crime/community violence, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, lack of parental support, and not completing high school (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Understanding the backgrounds, lifestyles and challenges and triumphs at-risk students are encountering on a daily basis will help educators positively influence these students' lives.

Urban schools in particular educate a diverse group of students. Typically, urban areas are characterized as having high; rates of poverty, concentrations of people of minority and recent immigrants, population density, rates of crime, and a lack of community connectedness (Lee, 2005). The multicultural facet as well as the large number of students who are living in low income households, means urban schools are more likely to have the responsibility of education at-risk students. However, urban schools typically have less access to resources due to school budgets which include, updated texts, up to date technology, and highly educated teachers (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). As a result, school personnel face challenges of meeting students' needs with available resources in an effective and beneficial manner. African American students are one group of students in urban schools who are at-risk of school failure. Urban communities that several African Americans families live in can place additional challenges on youth as they encounter hardship in a variety of systems they function in. Having basic needs met such as food and clothing at home, safety in their neighborhoods, and support from family are a few struggles for this population.

Across the nation African American youth face hardship. Recent statistics show that 23.8% of African American families live below the poverty line, approximately 39.7% are living in single parent (female-headed) households (NCES, 2009). In addition, national drop out rates for African American students is at 6.1%. The Midwest region of the United States, specifically Minnesota and Wisconsin, are seeing similar statistics for African American families. African Americans living in Minnesota have a high school drop out rate of 8.6% and a 7.7% drop out rate in Wisconsin (NCES, 2009). With this in mind, in order to promote positive growth and academic success for at-risk African American youth, students must be empowered to work toward achievement in all areas of their lives.

One influential player in the school, who advocates for and supports student success, is the school counselor. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) explains that school counselors work to promote academic, career, and personal-social growth for students (ASCA, 2004). School counselors work with students individually, through group counseling, classroom guidance lessons, and collaboration with teachers and student support staff. Additionally, school counselors are also held responsible for state and federal mandates which include; No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) (NCES, 2009).

Adhering to mandates that allow students and their families' opportunities and services to become successful throughout their schooling requires school counselors to be accountable in many areas of their lives. The promotion of student growth in urban settings is different than in suburban and rural areas. Therefore, school counselors in urban settings who work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, in particular African American youth, must be aware of the added aspect of social and educational failure due to surrounding environmental factors (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Consequently, working with urban youth requires an adequate amount of training and experience to be an effective school counselor.

Typically, the vast majority of schools counselors, in a variety of fields, are Caucasian. The American Counseling Association (ACA) membership denotes a limited number of counselors of diverse backgrounds. The ACA membership included only 1.1% Native Americans, 1.5% Asian Americans, 3.4% Latinos, and 5.9% African Americans (R. C.-Y, Chung, personal communication, October 23, 2004). The 13% of ACA counselors from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds is in sharp contrast with the overall U.S. population, which currently has a total of 38% African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and Native

Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), and the 43.5% of students of color enrolled in public education system in the United States (NCES, 2009). These statistics make it evident that there is a lack of diversity among counselors. Consequently, at-risk African American students will most likely be in contact with a school counselor who is of a different racial background. In turn, it is imperative for school counselors to be competent in African American culture and able to effectively utilize multicultural counseling practices.

Lastly, graduate students working toward their Masters in School Counseling typically experience coursework that educates future counselors about best practices and needed competencies for working with students. An important area of educational coursework is to provide future school counselors with the awareness, knowledge, and skills to work with diverse groups of students (Priester, Jones, Jackson-Bailey, Jana-Masri, Jordan, & Metz, 2008; Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). Providing future school counselors with information, theories, and techniques for working with CLD students enhances their cultural competencies and therefore increases counselor effectiveness. School counseling graduate programs are key components of creating academic expectations for working with unique populations of students and families. Continuing to improve these programs will consequently increase future school counselors' knowledge and experiences working with CLD students.

Statement of the Problem

The role of school counselors in schools is to contribute to all students' growth and successes in academics, career goals and personal issues. With a growing population of diverse students it is vital for future school counselors to be prepared to work with specific populations of students. To create a school counseling program that speaks to at-risk African American

students in urban schools, counselors must be properly educated and trained to work with this specific population.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this literature review is to address the needed competencies of future school counselors who work with ever-growing needs of CLD students, in particular, at-risk African Americans. This literature review will also explore the unique environment in urban schools as well as how to best serve this specific population. Through this literature review, the following questions will guide the researcher:

- 1) What environmental and cultural factors are imperative for school counselors to understand in order to identify and provide services to at-risk African American youth and families?
- 2) What is the role and cultural competencies needed for school counselors in urban schools to meet the unique needs of at-risk African American students?
- 3) How can academia better train future school counselors to address issues pertaining to at-risk African American youth and families?

Assumptions of the Study

African American students who are considered to be at-risk need a variety of counseling services and assistance than that of the general student population. Therefore, school counselors need to be trained and culturally competent in working with this specific population in order to address their unique needs.

Definition of Terms

In order to fully understand the additional knowledge school counselors must have to work with at-risk African American students it is important to define what it is meant by these terms.

At-risk: A young person who is in danger of academic failure (dropping out of school and/or performing below grade level) due to barriers which poverty creates such as a lack of proper care, safety, and familial guidance (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004).

Urban: A densely populated area which consists of (1) core census block groups with a population density of 1,000 people or more per square mile and (2) surrounding census blocks that have a population density of 500 people or more per square mile (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002).

Cultural Competence: Having the training, experience, knowledge, sensitivity, and awareness to effectively respond and guide at-risk African Americans (Lee & Wagner, 2007).

Future school counselor: Graduate student who is currently enrolled in course work to complete a Master's degree in School Counseling with the goal to work as a professional school counselor, this term is used interchangeably with school counseling student (Gopaul-McNicol, 2001).

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include:

1. This research looked at African Americans, and therefore can only be generalized for this specific ethnic group.

2. Graduate programs for school counseling which were evaluated were only from the Midwest region of the United States. Other regions of the country may have different classes and/or experiences in school counseling programs to prepare school counselors for work with diverse students.
3. Middle school and high school at-risk African Americans were the main focus for this research. Elementary school students of the same population are at a different developmental stage. In turn, school counselors may need additional skills to effectively work with other age groups of students.
4. Urban demographic areas are where this research is applied to. As at-risk African Americans student can live in a variety of settings rural and suburban areas will impact students differently.
5. This research specifically reviewed the training school counselors need to effectively work with at-risk African American. Other service providers' needs were not explored and may be different depending on the career duties.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will include a discussion of the literature review as it pertains to preparing future school counselors to work with at-risk African American students in urban schools. In addition, it includes a discussion of: environmental factors that put African American youth at-risk, school factors that put students at-risk, the role of school counselors in urban settings, suggestions for school counselors when working with at-risk African Americans and families, and suggestions for training future school counselors.

Issues at a Glance

As numbers show, the United States is continuously becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse creating a responsibility for public schools to educate many different races and cultures. Racial/ethnic student distributions in public schools in 2006 included: 1.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 17.1% African American, 20.5% Hispanic, and 56.5 % European American (NCES, 2009). With this growing diversity in schools, it is the Surgeon General's recommendation that service providers become increasingly more culturally aware and competent to effectively work with the mental health needs of the various cultures, races, and ethnicities in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. DHHS, 2001). The resiliency of African Americans has been seen throughout history. From being a human race which were purchased and used as slaves to facing segregation through the mid 1950's, African Americans have triumphed through many difficult situations (U.S. DHHS, 2001). While African Americans are often seen as a resilient and self-confident group of people, they are not without mental health needs. Helping youth to develop a strong sense of identity and gain personal strength can create young adults who are mentally and emotionally strong. Therefore, support staff in schools, in particular, school counselors, must be

aware of the factors that contribute to putting African American students at-risk of school failure then be able to provide students with services to successfully finish school and triumph through adverse circumstances.

Contributing Environmental Factors that put African American Students At-Risk

As previously defined, an at-risk student is a child who's potential to be a productive and well adjusted adult is at odds because of educational and social failure due to barriers in the home and community (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). There are several environmental factors in urban settings where many African American youth grow up that contribute to their label of being at-risk. School counselors who are aware of these factors can effectively work with students to educate and provide them with resources that will help them be safe in their environment.

Poverty and Violence

Urban areas face high levels of concentrated poverty. In turn, students attending an urban school often are a part of a family that resides in a neighborhood of low socioeconomic status (SES) (Lee, 2005). In fact, Gutman, McLoyd and Tokoyawa (2005) stated, "A disproportionate number of African American families live in inner-city neighborhoods and face a multitude of stresses associated with living conditions" (p. 427). Associated with this, the Surgeon General stated that SES is connected to mental health needs. More specifically, the lower a person/family's SES the more mental health issues are present (U.S. DHHS, 2001). As a result, students attending urban schools may have mental health concerns due to high levels of financial distress for their families.

Neighborhood violence is a contributing environmental factor that also places African American youth at-risk. In relation to concentrated areas of poverty which this population of

youth is living, these areas see many acts of violence due to crime and/or gang related activity (Lee & Wagner, 2007). Exposure to violence has been shown to have negative impacts on youth's mental health. Horowitz, McKay and Marshall (2005) found that children consistently felt in danger in urban neighborhoods because of drug deals, shootings, and/or gang members controlling the streets. In turn, children stated that they were unsure who could be trusted in their neighborhoods and feared going outside because they risked being killed. Many of the children who participated in the study witnessed violent events and showed signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anxiety. These violent neighborhood experiences negatively impact children not only in their feelings of safety but also in their ability to positively cope. Along similar lines, Dempsey (2002) found that youth who are exposed to community violence learn negative ways to cope such as, avoiding, being aggressive, and internalizing behaviors. The dangerous neighborhood this population is living in impedes their ability to feel safe in their surroundings and therefore, hinders their development in a safe and healthy environment.

Lack of Mentoring and/or Positive Role Models

At-risk African Americans living in urban areas often lack a positive support group. Living in an environment that can be dangerous and violent, children are exposed to and frequently involved with groups of people who partake in unhealthy activities (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). With this in mind, youth tend to feel negative peer pressure and lack positive role models in their community. First, being involved with the wrong peer group (e.g. people who participate in illegal activities or are violent) promote negative lifestyles, hinder youth from making morally right choices, and place youth in compromising situations (Harris, 1995).

African American youth living in urban areas may experience negative peer pressure and expose themselves to potentially harmful experiences.

Additionally, African American adolescents, especially males, tend to lack role models. Since many African American male adolescents live in homes with absent fathers they rely on people in their neighborhood to provide them with guidance and male support (Harris, 1995). Often times, the support group they find have been unsuccessful in their lives as they are affiliated with gangs or participate in illegal activities. Many youth who rely on this group for support have seen members get killed or put in jail or face their own negative consequences from group associations. In turn, this group of at-risk youth becomes discouraged and lacks positive feedback about their future and potential successes. At the same time, Harris (1995) found that at-risk African American male adolescents do have high career aspirations, but feel the lack of guidance in the right direction due to their surrounding environment and negative views of their identity as a poor African American living in a dangerous urban area. For at-risk African American youth to be successful they need support from positive role models who can guide them to make positive choices in all areas of their lives.

Mental Health

While African American populations often rely on each other to cope with adverse situations they are not without mental health needs (U.S. DHHS, 2001). Living in poverty, seeing or being victims of violence, and lacking positive support can be detrimental to children's mental health. The environment that places African American youth at-risk contribute to this population of youth's increased risk of mental health problems and impedes them from receiving needed services (Gonzalez, 2005; Green & Keys, 2001). A lack of mental health assistance can happen for two reasons (U.S. DHHS, 2001). First, African American culture lacks trust in

authority. The Surgeon General Report (2001) noted that “historical and contemporary negative treatment have lead to mistrust of authorities, many of whom are not seen as having the best interests of African Americans in mind” (p. 57). Thus, many African Americans do not seek services because of the lack of trust and question motives of people of authority. Also, living in poverty limits the amount of medical coverage to assist families with mental health needs, therefore, this population of youth is typically not receiving proper care. A lack of services can cause mental health issues to go unnoticed and untreated creating additional hardship for this at-risk population.

Similar to other races in the United States, mental health issues in African American youth vary. The Surgeon General Report noted that mental health illnesses in African American youth tend to be similar to European American youth. Some differences that have been seen include African American youth having higher rates of symptoms of; obsessive-compulsive disorder, conduct disorder and depression (U.S. DHHS, 2001). With each child having different experiences and different levels of resiliency, it is important to consider mental health issues for children on an individual basis. School counselors are therefore key players in helping students feel valued and cared about and providing students with resources to help them find support in a culturally appropriate manner (Gonzalez, 2005).

Factors Impacting School Success

Environmental characteristics previously discussed are contributing factors that place African American youth at-risk. Along with these hindrances, additional factors impact school success for these students.

Lack of Educational Resources

First, urban settings in which at-risk African American students are overwhelming educated in place a strain on student success. Urban schools often have less access to technology and educational resources, larger class sizes, and employ less educated and driven teachers in comparison to rural and suburban schools (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Limited resources occur in urban schools due to a lack of public funding and improper management by educational leaders (Lee, 2005). Similarly, urban schools pay smaller salaries and therefore hire the less qualified teachers than suburban schools with more public funding. This lack of resources further holds back an already struggling group of students from having access to top notch educational material and opportunities to promote growth.

Feelings of Safety in Schools and Surroundings

Violence and threats of violence are also occurring in urban schools. Data collected from schools across the country in the 2007-2008 school year reveals the prevalence of violence in schools. Some types of violence that were looked at included, hate-crimes, gang-related crimes, verbal abuse, student bullying, student racial/ethnic tensions, and physical attacks with and without weapons (NCES, 2009). Urban school data revealed that 27.5 % of the schools see bullying happen once a week, 33.9 % report gang activities during the school day, and 5.4% report student racial/ethnic tension during the week. Additionally, out of 17,500 urban schools that were surveyed, 82.1% reported that violent incidents occur in the school and 20.2% (of 4,300 schools reporting) stated that there were serious violent incidents at their school. This data clearly shows school staff and urban communities that urban schools see several types of violence in the hallways and classrooms.

Violence that occurs during the school day impacts students' feelings of safety and ability to learn. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2009) reported that 34% of teachers in the 2007-2008 school year felt that student misbehavior and violence negatively impacted teaching and therefore student education. Furthermore, African American students in urban high schools reported feeling unsafe on their way to school and throughout the school day as their high schools often are equipped metal detectors and security guards due to the presence of weapons and gang violence in school (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Also, the NCES (2009) found that 10% of African American students reported being threatened or injured by another student during the school day and 38% reported gang presence in schools compared to European American students (7% and 17%, respectively). As violence is a concern in schools, school counselors are key players in creating a safe school environment for students to learn.

Cultural Differences in Learning

It is important to note how cultural differences impact learning for African American students. As human values, beliefs, future goals, personal expectations, and attitudes develop from one's cultural background, African American culture can impact a student's drive to academically excel in school, in turn placing students at-risk of school failure (Green, 2001). There are a few reasons why it can be a challenge for this group of students to achieve academic success. First, the negative stigma of doing well in school can hinder student from getting good grades (Butler, 2003). African American culture of youth tends to see school attendance, good behavior, and getting good grades as something to be looked down upon. Consequently, African American students who are successful in school have the potential to be bullied and socially isolated from their African American peers. In addition, school can be challenging for African American youth because they do not relate to the curriculum or teaching style (Butler, 2003).

Many classrooms in the United States encourage individual work and achievement. However, African American culture encompasses the ideas of cooperation and collaboration. Therefore, these students may struggle with assignments where they are unable to support and work together with their classmates.

Short-Term vs. Long-Term Goals

Another reason school achievement may be low on the priority list for this population of students is due to more pressing needs in their lives. Students are often aware that education can lead them to their goals; however, they have also experienced barriers in their lives that continue to prevent them from being successful (Butler, 2003). Consequently, personal, familial, and/or community issues may be held in higher regard and more important to take care of than completing and doing well in school. These challenges that put urban youth at-risk are often the cause of students' low academic success and high drop out rates in school. Statistics report that students from urban populations are less likely to go on to post secondary schooling compared to their rural and suburban counterparts (Lee, 2005). Moreover, the achievement gap for these students shows that urban high school students are less likely to finish high school in 4 years (if at all) and often score lower on national exams.

Lee's (2005) research notes that school counseling programs are difficult to run in urban high school due to, "student absenteeism, family instability, high levels of student transience, increasing school violence, and high rates of student pregnancy" (p. 186). Nevertheless, despite the obstacles at-risk students may face, school counselors must work to help these students have a positive attitude and outlook on their personal success since many external factors cause them to think otherwise (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). School counselors are encouraged to develop programs that help students acquire a knowledge base, skills training, and a positive self-identity

that allow students to see that their well being is cared about and advocated for. Doing so provides at-risk students the ability to overcome society's low expectations for this population.

Systematic School Counseling Programs

The atmosphere of urban schools requires school counseling programs to assist students' academic, personal-social, and career development in a systematic way. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) acknowledges that when school counselors work with students who are at-risk, the program must place its attention on prevention and intervention as they focus on the many aspects of student life in and out of school (ASCA, 2004). In turn, a systematic, or whole system approach, can be the most effective approach for school counseling programs in urban schools. A systematic approach is rooted in the idea that change in one area of a person's life creates change in another area; each system that a person lives in impacts the other (Kronick, 1997). Creating a systematic school counseling program that promotes meaningful change can therefore be beneficial to students who are at-risk of school failure and life struggles.

The construction of a program that accounts for several facets of struggle and disadvantage in at-risk students' lives is a beginning step to improve their futures. Looking at the big picture, by creating positive change in the schools where at-risk students attend can create changes in society. Kronick (1997) explains that helping at-risk students graduate high school, become qualified workers, and gain a positive self image will eventually, "bring about changes in welfare, corrections, health, and mental health" (p. 6). Doing this early in students' development allows the schools to help students become successful, well adjusted members of society who can handle adverse situation and choose non-destructive lifestyles. Several suggestions have been made which allow school counselors to focus on students' surrounding systems. ASCA (2004) instructs school counselors to collaborate with staff and faculty, parents,

and agencies in the community that promote positive growth of youth. In addition, providing guidance lessons that help students understand at-risk behaviors, offering responsive services and referrals if needed, working with individual students regarding future planning, as well as helping staff and parents better understand student behaviors, will contribute to building a strong counseling program for at-risk youth.

School counselors are also to be aware of the neighborhood structure students live in (e.g. values, violence, living conditions, etc.) and the community resources that are available to them. Making these resources known to students, for example Boys and Girls Clubs, church activities, and encouraging them to participate in these groups have proven to be a way to lower at-risk African American student drop out rates (Harris, 1995). Another example of working with the community is to establish wraparound services. These programs connect at-risk youth with support networks and enable them to seek mental health treatment (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Wrap-around programs have been found to be effective, especially for African American at-risk populations, as they decrease delinquency, promote staying in school, and focus on future careers. Having support in the schools to participate in positive community membership is a way to benefit at-risk students, not only in the schools but also in their communities.

School Counselor Competencies

Counseling multicultural students requires the utilization of different skills sets compared to working with European American students. Given that each cultural has different norms, values, and future life outlooks, being well-versed in these ideas allow counselors to work better with individual students (Constantine, 2001). African American culture has a certain culture of identity, support, and peer relationships of their youth. Within this mix, at-risk groups of students also have a culture that is important to understand in order to positively support this

group, as previously discussed. The following competencies assist school counselor to see positive results when working with at-risk African American students.

Cultural Competency

First and foremost, being culturally competent is vital when connecting with African American youth. Having a firm understanding of their historical background, culture, and societal norms allows counselors to successfully work with at-risk student (Lee & Wagner, 2007). Furthermore, being able to respond to students effectively occurs when counselors have the awareness, knowledge and skills to work with the African American at-risk population. Day-Vines and Day-Hairston (2005) state “Counselors who understand the central properties of urban African American culture are better positioned to develop effective interventions that improve discipline outcomes” (p. 237). This can be done through reading newspapers, attending cultural events, talking to people who identify with the culture, being willing to ask questions about certain cultural norms/values, collaboration/consultation with faculty/staff in the school, and doing research. More formal multicultural trainings are also available to school counselors and support staff. Research suggests that gaining multicultural training helps counselor’s become more aware of specific cultures, work on personal biases and cultural consciousness, as well as be able to better communicate empathy with diverse groups (Constantine, 2001; Priester et al., 2008; Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992; Uehara, 2005). Overall, cultural awareness and expertise is imperative to the school counselor’s success of building relationships with students, encouraging family support and involvement, and utilizing community resources for students (Keys & Lockhart, 1998).

Approaches to Provide Curricular and Mental Health Services

Another important competency for school counselors to possess is the knowledge and ability to use a variety of counseling techniques and therapies (Constantine, 2001; Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). At-risk African American students tend to face problems that require immediate solutions (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Accordingly, the approach a counselor uses with this population of students during counseling sessions is important. For example, using a person-center therapy, one that is non-directive and allows the student to gradually find the solution, is a beneficial technique but is not useful for urgent matters which at-risk students encounter (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). A more appropriate approach is to use direct techniques, such as setting goals or finding solutions to current problems. Being flexible and using a variety of techniques with students allows school counselors to support individual needs of students in a culturally appropriate way. Constantine (2001) found that counselors who used practices/skills from a variety of theory bases allowed them to better adapt and work with various cultures. Other ways that counselors can help students with their immediate needs can be through referrals, collaboration with teachers and administrators, and connecting with key players in the community (e.g. pastors, community leaders) (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005). Showing students genuine interest and concern for their needs helps them develop trust as well as provides them with immediate feedback of how to cope with and begin to resolve their current struggles. Overall, being aware of cultural influences allows school counselors to implement appropriate counseling practices on an individual student basis.

Empowering Students: Promoting Self-Confidence

Several bodies of research state that knowing how to empower at-risk African American students is an important competency for school counselors (Harris, 1995; Fusick & Bordeau,

2004; Lee, 2001; Lee, 2005; Lee & Wagner, 2007). Having the skills and knowledge to educate students in how to proactively empower themselves to overcome challenges they face will allow counselors to connect with students and help them be successful (Lee & Wagner, 2007). As self-identity is a key aspect to develop in at-risk African American youth, modeling and teaching about empowerment contributes to students' identity formation. Empowerment provides students with the ability to control their life, and the skills that help them actively improve their futures regardless of their environment and/or adverse situations they face (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004).

There are several ways which students can become empowered. First, school counselors must provide at-risk African Americans with skills to work through obstacles they are faced with rather than teaching students how to just survive their current life circumstances (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Being successful and able to overcome adversity can be achieved by having skills to solve a problem not simply managing the situation. Setting high expectations for students, even though they are considered at-risk for school failure, allows students to believe that they can overcome their struggles and reach success. In addition, school counselors should work with students on: developing positive self-concepts, being able to recognize personal strengths, how to effectively deal with racism, goal setting, becoming leaders in the school and community, and being able to find support and help when needed (Lee & Wagner, 2007). Empowerment gives students the skills to proactively overcome life challenges. School counselors with knowledge and skill to teach empowerment therefore can provide students with powerful skills to be successful.

Leadership

School counselors in urban schools, who work with this specific population, are also being asked to extend their competencies beyond the duties of student academic, career, and personal-social development (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004; Lee, 2001; Lee 2005). Becoming leaders in the school and being student advocates are two ways to extend these duties. Being a role model who is actively working to help at-risk African Americans succeed in school as well as in the community shows students they are worthwhile and deserving of a strong education (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Working with other educational leaders and stakeholders can call for a change not just for one grade level or school, but for entire districts with high populations of at-risk students. Advocating for students in the community acknowledges that at-risk students are hard working youth who need community resources and support to assist in their development. Being a leader who is informed about social policies, criminal justice, and family dynamics for at-risk youth has been shown to empower students in school as well as in their neighborhoods and communities (Lee, 2005).

Similarly, after consultation and observation in a number of culturally diverse schools, Lee (2001) found that schools that were the most responsive to student needs; set high standards for all students, had curriculum that extended to all cultures all the time, continuously trained faculty and staff about diversity, encouraged a sense of community in the school, and established ways to deal with racism and tension within the school. This literature further supports that competent and knowledgeable school counselors are leaders in creating schools that care for numerous student needs.

Suggestions for Working with Students and Their Families

Cultural differences and lifestyles amongst youth mean school counselors must have different tactics and methods to work with individual students. Research provides several suggestions for how to effectively work with at-risk African American students and their families.

Gaining Trust

Gaining trust is the first step of being able to connect and effectively work with at-risk African American youth. As noted earlier, in African American culture there is a stigma of seeking help (Gonzalez, 2005). More specifically, the Surgeon General stated that if students do not feel trust or welcomed by counselors they may be reluctant to seek needed help (U.S. DHHS, 2001). Thus, having the ability to quickly build rapport with students allows them the opportunity to disclose information and find solutions to their presenting problems. Regardless if a school counselor is from the same background as the student, allowing the student to see that the counselor understands their culture while acknowledging their differences helps the student create this needed trust and rapport with the counselor (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Effective counselors are able to build rapport with African American students by clarifying their role as a counselor, informing students about the limits of confidentiality, and providing a welcoming environment where students' emotions are validated (Harris, 1995). As a result, a trusting therapeutic relationship with at-risk students can help counselors identify if additional mental health services are needed.

Self-Awareness and Self-Esteem: Ethnic Identity

Identity formation of African American students is crucial. A school counselor plays a pivotal role in helping students successfully form and feel positive about who they are and what

they stand for. Therefore, presenting students with the stages of identity formation helps them explore their values and beliefs (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Along similar lines, Lee (2001) found that the most successful school counselors who worked with diverse groups of students ran self-awareness groups which helped students with identity development and to gather an appreciation of their cultural background. Working with students regarding their interpersonal struggles and triumphs encourages them to feel empowered, be resilient, and have control of their actions and life choices.

Increasing Home-School Collaboration

Connecting with families is another key role for school counselors when working with this specific population. It must be noted however, this can sometimes be challenging as some families feel that schools are not welcoming or necessary for their children (Lee, 2001).

Therefore, helping families feel supported, listened to, and comfortable in the schools will help cross cultural barriers and allow strong bonds to be formed. As a school counselor, expressing interest and concern for the student and their family helps families feel more comfortable with the counselor and the ideas/suggestions he/she may have regarding the student (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Creating this feeling may take time and will be different for each family. A counselor must be willing to work with the family in ways which they feel most at ease (e.g. through face to face interactions in their home, phone calls, news letters, etc.).

Butler (2003) found that involving community leaders and businesses with schools helps students and families with feel more comfortable and connected to the school. Collaborating with trusted community leaders, for example pastors, can break down the trust barrier between a counselor of a different culture and/or ethnicity and family. In addition, community collaboration can provide useful information to a counselor regarding a family's lifestyle or

hesitation of working with school staff. School counselors who are advocates for the student and families creates a link between school and home where families feel supported and therefore more willing to invest in their students' school experience (Lee, 2001). Together, a student's family and school can promote wellness in the student's life and provide him/her the needed support to be successful in and out of school.

Positive Role Models and Mentoring

Another suggestion for working with at-risk African American students is to provide them with positive role models (Butler, 2003). As mentioned earlier, young African American males often lack a strong male role model in their lives. Often this occurs because they living in a single parent household headed by the mother or surrounding male influences are involved in violent and/or illegal activities (Harris, 1995). Consequently, it is beneficial to show both male and female students community members who they can identify with, while showing how they made positive life choices and as a result are successful (Butler, 2003). This can be accomplished by bringing students on job location tours to speak with successful African American employees, providing opportunities for students to have a mentor who is the same ethnicity, and/or set up a college fair where African American college students can speak to youth about motivation and setting future goals. The presence of successful men and women who are from similar backgrounds of these students reinforces the importance of doing well in school and shows students that future success is possible regardless of their current circumstances.

The Role of Training Programs and Academia

Properly educating future school counselors is important to continue to have strong school counseling programs across the nation. Training future school counselors about current

issues youth are facing as well as providing them with skills and techniques to work with all types of students will ensure that school counselors can be effective and beneficial to student populations across states, cities, and districts (Gopaul-McNicol, 2001). Furthermore, the continuous increase in cultural and ethnic diversity across the country makes it imperative for school counseling graduate programs to incorporate multicultural training throughout their coursework. As school counselors help students make decisions regarding their coursework, future plans, and personal/social experiences cultural competency is needed in order to support students in making choices that align with their cultural values (Gopaul-McNicol, 2001).

Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills

The overall goal for multicultural training programs is to help future school counselors gain awareness, knowledge, and skills regarding an array of races/cultures (Priester et. al., 2008; Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). This occurs when counselors are trained to have an understanding of how their own cultural background impacts their life, gain an understanding about other cultural and racial group norms, and learn an assortment of counseling techniques that will benefit a diverse group of students. However, Tomlinson-Clarke (2000) found that, “although [multicultural] training was valued, most [students] perceived the need for further training in order to move toward multicultural competence” (p. 227). Additionally, often times discomfort and anxieties that are felt when working with culturally and linguistically diverse students comes from a lack of knowledge, experience, and skills to effectively impact students from diverse backgrounds (Uehara, 2005). With this being said, there are several ways school counseling programs can improve and increase their students’ cultural competence and lessen anxieties of working with diverse populations.

Multicultural Coursework

First, school counseling programs must require students to take a variety of multicultural coursework. Constantine (2001, 2002) found the more multicultural classes counseling students took, the greater their self-reported cultural competence. Currently, school counseling training programs at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and University of Wisconsin-Madison have mission statements that stress the importance of multicultural training and competency (University of Minnesota, 2008; University of Wisconsin, 2007). Through these mission statements it is apparent that these programs are aware of the importance of cultural competency yet both only require one course of multiculturalism. Keim, Warring, and Rau (2001) stated that training programs that have one multicultural class are significant as they lay the groundwork for multicultural counseling competence yet, “skill development is unlikely without awareness and knowledge” (p. 252). For that reason, training programs are more effective when they continuously teach future school counselors multicultural concepts that will improve their professional counseling skills.

Multicultural training and coursework is critical to increasing future school counselors’ cultural competence. Coleman (2006) talked to graduate counseling student’s who experienced multicultural training and found that having experiences with peers from diverse backgrounds and personal life experiences with culturally diverse groups of people helped develop multicultural competence. Diversity in the classroom allows for students in training to hear a variety of viewpoints and have more opportunities to evaluate personal beliefs, attitudes and assumptions (Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000). However, as previously mentioned, counselor demographics are typically not of diverse backgrounds. With this in mind, it has been noted that, “Our teachers and human service workers are too often white and female. The human service

professions must actively recruit on an honest basis, not a superficial one, more people of color” (Kronick, 1997, p. 31). Consequently, school counseling training programs must promote their program and encourage diverse students to enter the profession. Doing so will enhance classroom discussion and therefore cultural awareness of future school counselors as well as diversify the field of school counseling.

Additionally, multicultural course work allows future school counselors an opportunity to evaluate themselves as individuals. Tomlinson-Clarke (2000) found the most challenging part about multicultural training for future school counselors was the self evaluation and examination of personal beliefs. Students found it was easier to discuss other people’s opinions and feelings rather than discuss their own. As a result, educators must include thought provoking discussions about culture and challenge students to look at their racial identities in order to improve multicultural competencies and counselor abilities to relate other cultural groups (Constantine, 2001; Constantine, 2002; Middleton et al., 2005). While challenging and at times uncomfortable, school counselors who are able to understand their personal identities and values are able to empathize and better understand a student’s perspective, thus creating more effective school counseling programs.

Experiential Coursework

Classroom education is one way to help future school counselors become more culturally competent. Then, practice in the field provides future counselor diverse student experiences. Coleman (2006) found that graduate students thought hands-on components in coursework were imperative to work with diverse populations of students. Thus it is important for educators to teach multicultural counseling skills and then ask students to demonstrate these skills in a school environment (Brott, 2006). Coursework in the classroom is able to provide a foundation while

experiential coursework allows students to use their skills and directly work with diverse populations of students. In one study, sixty-four multicultural course syllabi were collected from a variety of graduate counseling programs. Upon analysis it was found that; overall, the courses stressed the importance of learning about cultural norms yet provided very few opportunities to develop one's own cultural awareness or learn and practice multicultural counseling techniques (Priester et al., 2008). Providing future school counselors with the opportunity to interact with different races/ethnicities allows them to utilize their knowledge and turn it into professional skills and experiences.

Experiential coursework can be done during practicum and internship classes. Having future school counselors work in schools with students of culturally and diverse demographics, provides them with the hands-on experience. During this time they will continue to gain important skills that increase cultural competency. Some of these skills include: gaining awareness of how a student's language (dialects and/or non-English speakers) impacts their ability to learn, take tests, or socialize with peers, understanding behavior, religion, values, and familial expectations of diverse students, as well as being able to consult with other professionals, school staff, and community leaders (Gopaul-McNicol, 2001). While some of this information can be taught in a classroom, first hand experience provides opportunities for connecting with students and therefore professional growth. The incorporation of classroom and experiential coursework for school counselor training programs allows students to gain cultural competency. Providing them with the awareness, knowledge and skills to work with diverse and at-risk populations enhances school counselor's abilities to connect with students.

Chapter III: Summary, Critical Analysis, and Recommendations

The purpose of this literature review was to look at factors that put African American students at-risk of school failure. The researcher discussed the important role that school counselors play when working with this unique population of students and their families. Additionally, the literature review emphasized the need for multicultural training in graduate coursework to help school counselors become culturally competent and therefore effectively work with at-risk African American students. This chapter will address a summary of the literature, review the research questions, and offer recommendations as it pertains to preparing future school counselors to work with at-risk African Americans, as well as practice and research.

Summary

As schools continue to become more culturally and linguistically diverse, school districts and communities must prepare school faculty and staff to work with a variety of racial/ethnic student backgrounds. In particular, faculty and staff must be prepared to support and educate students who are at-risk of school failure due to surrounding environments students live in (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). African Americans living in urban settings are one group of students who are often labeled at-risk. Having the knowledge, awareness, and skills to work with at-risk students will enhance their level of academic achievement and promote wellness in all areas of a student's life.

The environment that African Americans live in can place youth at-risk of school failure. Urban areas which are densely populated often have a plethora of low income neighborhoods. With a large population of African Americans living in urban areas, living in poverty is of concern. Families with low SES tend to live these low income neighborhoods which are

commonly unsafe areas. These neighborhoods see violence, illegal activities, and gang involvement occurring regularly. Therefore, youth living in unsafe neighborhoods can witness violence and/or become involved with gang activity (including violent and illegal activities). Consequently, at-risk African American students often lack positive role models in their environment and are at an increased risk of mental health issues (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004; USDHHS, 2001).

Urban schools which several African American youth attend also have contributing factors that place students at-risk. These schools lack highly educated teachers, up-to-date educational material, and technology which enhance school success. Additionally, urban schools see more violence than suburban and rural schools which can include; hate-crimes, gang activities, verbal and physical abuse, and weapon possessions (NCES, 2009). African American students also experience a cultural barrier in learning. While schools often promote individual achievement, African American culture values togetherness and cooperation in turn creating a discrepancy in how students are being taught and how they learn best (Butler, 2003). Finally, students may not be able to focus on school work due to more pressing needs in their lives. For example, taking care of family or working to pay bills may be first on the priority list before class work. Together, these school factors can impede on student learning thus decrease academic achievement.

With several factors that place African American students at-risk, school counselors are being asked to support and advocate for students to help them reach success. ASCA asks school counselors to assist students in academics, career, and personal/social development (ASCA, 2004). In congruence, effective school counselors are able to work at a systematic level, involving schools, communities, and families to support students in these three areas. As a

school leader, school counselors must be culturally competent, able to provide therapeutic mental health services, and available to promote empowerment to students. Similarly, it is vital for school counselors to have a variety of means for working with at-risk African American students and families. These include the ability to; gain rapport and trust with students and families, support and explore student ethnic identity, increase school-home collaboration, and connect students with positive role models and mentors in the community.

To work with this unique population of students, specific training is needed for school counselors. Training programs for future school counselors must focus on multicultural training. This training will improve school counselors' awareness, knowledge, and skills in regards to a variety of cultures which in turn it better prepares them to work with diverse groups of students. Increasing multicultural course requirements as well as including more discussions about racial identity and differing viewpoints can improve school counselors' multicultural proficiencies. Additionally, experiential coursework will enhance future school counselor skills and allow them to gain beneficial experience of working with diverse students.

Critical Analysis

Across the nation educators are being asked to teach, support, and instill success in a diverse group of students. Without first understanding cultural backgrounds and lifestyles of students educators are responsible to teach, it will be difficult to continue to promote academic achievement for every child. Additionally, educators must be aware of the risk factors that put students at odds of being successful in schools. With that being said, educators must be culturally proficient and able to recognize the unique needs of individual students and/or needs of particular cultures. As this literature review specifically looked at African American students

who are considered at-risk of school failure, it is clear that there are many facets and roadblocks to understand and get through in order to educate this population.

At-risk African Americans living in urban areas face a number of environmental factors that can impede on their learning and school success. For example, living in a neighborhood of poverty impedes on children's feelings of safety and availability of positive role models to guide their development. Therefore, a child's needs of safety, love, and belonging are not being met and can limit a student's ability to focus on school work or concern of reaching academic success. Similarly, the environment this group of African American youth are surrounded by increase their risk of mental health issues which create further challenges to be successful in school (U.S. DHHS, 2001). Educators who understand the environmental factors that put African American youth at-risk are better able to empathize and find solutions to this group's needs and are better prepared in finding students support and safety in their communities.

Urban schools also have contributing factors that impede at-risk African American student success. The unavailability of up-to-date learning materials and current technology limit the curriculum that can be taught and the resources students can use. Also, as African American culture is heavily focused on cooperation and teamwork to solve problems and complete tasks the teaching style and expectation of individual student success used in classrooms can hinder learning (Butler, 2003). Furthermore, life outside of school tends to be more of a priority than academic success for this population. Having other concerns outside the classroom places education on the back burner and oftentimes is the last thing that needs to be worried about. Therefore, educators must be aware of cultural norms and values of African American youth and be able to accommodate students' learning styles as well as life circumstances that can prevent them from doing school work.

School counselors are key players in the school to help at-risk African American student be successful in school and in life. School counselors are responsible for promoting academic, career, and personal/social development of all students. When working with at-risk African American students school counselors are also responsible for creating systematic change for students by using counseling techniques that enable rapport building and speak to this population. Promoting self-identity and empowerment, working with families and communities to promote overall success of youth, and being leaders in the school who show support and genuine concern for student well being helps at-risk African American students see their potential and become successful. In addition, creating a school atmosphere that understands student culture, background, and current life challenges, students are able to feel supported and have access to resources that promote success in and out of school. Strong school counseling program in the schools assists with having welcoming school atmospheres and the resources to help at-risk students become thriving young adults.

To continue to have effective school counseling programs, future school counselors must be trained to work with diverse student populations. While graduate programs currently require multicultural coursework, it is imperative that counselor educators increase students' multicultural competency. Effective coursework therefore entails both classroom and experiential learning. Having discussions with a diverse peer group, looking at one's own racial identity, and learning about other racial/ethnic groups provides the groundwork for cultural competence. Then, having the experience in schools working with diverse groups of students allows future school counselors to apply their knowledge and gain important skills for working with diverse student populations. Together, both types of coursework allow future school

counselors to gain the needed awareness, knowledge and skills to work with the ever growing diversity in school across the nation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

At-risk African American students face several barriers before being able to reach academic achievement. Schools have the responsibility and opportunity to help all students overcome the odds of failure and support them as they work toward living a successful life. Preparing school counselors to work with at-risk African American students requires them to have a variety of knowledge about African American culture, lifestyle, and surrounding environmental factors that can impede on their school success and overall well being. As school counselors play an imperative role in the school to promote systematic change for African American youth, properly training future school counselors is of tremendous importance.

Thus, the following recommendations are being forwarded to prepare school counselors to work with at-risk African American students:

1. School counselors are key players in the school who can identify African American students who may be at-risk of school failure by being aware of the environmental factors that impact academic success. In order for this to occur, school counselors must be in touch with the student populations' needs as well as individual student concerns. Gaining student trust and frequently talking to students will allow school counselors to be aware of specific student needs.
2. Furthermore, school districts that employ schools counselors should continuously provide additional training to meet the unique and changing needs of their students.
3. Graduate programs should increase their coursework on multiculturalism. Increasing the number of multicultural classes needed to complete the program, as well as

continuing multicultural discussions in all classes, will increase future school counselors' cultural competencies.

4. Additionally, higher education institutions, who train students to become professional school counselors, must promote diversity in their programs. Increasing student and faculty diversity will allow for more opportunities to learn about other cultures. If graduate programs are limited in diversity and knowledge of urban schools they should invite faculty from other institutions who have genuine expertise in the field of at-risk student populations. Doing so will create opportunity for counselors in training to learn counseling strategies and best practices of educating at-risk African Americans.
5. Finally, higher education institutions should require graduate students to complete fieldwork experiences/internships in a variety of school settings (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) in order to experience and gain confidence in the diverging and converging methods of practice and techniques used with various populations of students.

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