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Introduction to the Special Issue on Advancing School Counseling Groups with Black Male Youth

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Abstract

This article serves as a prologue to a special issue of JSCPE featuring Steen et al.'s (2023) lead paper and three invited commentaries. The topic under consideration is improving academic and social-emotional outcomes of Black male youth using the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model. After introducing the issue's focus, the primary overlapping themes posited in the commentaries are summarized. My reflections concerning the focus article's theoretical underpinnings, research review, and small group counseling model are briefly included. In conclusion, I provide tentative suggestions to enhance small group work using Achieving Success Everyday model.

Keywords: Black male adolescents, school-based group counseling, critical race theory, ecosystemic theory, intersectionality

This special issue of JSCPE considers a pressing need in U.S. schools, namely, the use of group counseling interventions to enhance the educational and social-emotional outcomes of Black middle school youth. The issue begins with an inspiring and provocative article ("Reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model to Focus on the Strengths of Black Male Middle School Youth") authored by Sam Steen, Julius Davis, and Canaan Bethea (2023). It is followed by three invited commentaries (see papers by Norma Day-Vines, Caroline Lopez-Perry [2023], and Kris Goodrich [2023], respectively) whose identities were masked to one another and the authors of the lead paper. Each commentator was solicited based on their expertise related to the topics under discussion. Next, I summarize the gist of the three commentaries as well as include some reflections and tentative suggestions for refining Steen et al.'s group model.

More specifically, Steen et al.'s (2023) opening paper is innovative and forward-thinking. To its credit, the narrative adopts a strengths-based, constructive approach (Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model) to academically and socially supporting Black middle school youth. However, they do not neglect the challenging context that Black youth face in schools, documenting the underlying factors contributing to the deficit-oriented mindset of many American educators (Zhao, 2016). Traditionally marginalized children are often regarded as "at-risk" for school failure rather than "at promise" for academic success. In fact, an abundance of research indicates that Black youth feel

they are left out, stigmatized, and saddled with reactive or remediation-focused services (e.g., Anderson, 2018). Steen et al. suggest that educational policymakers have done little to meaningfully address the larger systemic limitations (e.g., hostile barriers and strictures, prejudice, economic deprivation, lack of equitable access) contributing to student academic deficiencies. These "so-called" support programs often fail to utilize students' developmental assets to potentially offset deficits. It is thus not surprising that Black pupils are overrepresented in K-12 special education and related remediation programs (Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Regrettably, services to Black youth are largely inefficacious, for only a small percentage of students ever fully "graduate" from them. To inform readers about alternatives to these traditional interventions, Steen et al. (2023) review pertinent theory, educational and school counseling-related research, and innovative small group intervention practices that can be instituted to boost the learning of Black middle-schoolers.

Synthesis of Commentaries

Although the commentators differed in their levels of analysis and emphases, several commonalities are noteworthy. First, as highlighted above, the writers restated the significant obstacles Black youth must navigate during their school years. Drawing from Steen et al. (2023), the commentators spoke to these challenges, intimating that the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model can help moderate them. The Steen et al. small group design and foci can actually contribute to the well-being of Black male youth. Most optimistically, Lopez-Perry (2023) contended this group structure can be deployed, in part, to disrupt white hegemony in American schools. The strengths of the model and areas to be further explored and authenticated through empirical research were also mentioned.

Second, the authorities voiced their support of critical race theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework for Steen et al.'s (2023) work and others. Despite the sociopolitical denunciations of CRT and its alleged nefarious incorporation into school curricula and practices (see articles in *Education-Week Spotlight*; e.g., Sawchuk, 2021), Steen et al. alongside the commentators affirmed CRT's scholarly stature and explanatory value. The authors maintained that CRT is an appropriate orientation to guide academic and social-emotional support of Black male youth. Day-Vines (2023), for example, declared the following: "The major strength of this systematic review is the attention to critical race theory

(CRT) as an organizing principle.” In short, CRT, despite its harshest detractors, is a resilient and explanatory frame of reference for researchers and practitioners alike, particularly as they formulate new school counseling models and specific strategies to augment Black adolescents’ academic and social-emotional skillsets.

Commentators were especially appreciative of Steen et al.’s (2023) in-depth research review, as well as its scholarlyness and astute conclusions. Lopez-Perry (2023), for example, reiterated a troubling observation made in the lead article: “Results from this review [Steen et al.] indicate that most scholarly works on school counseling interventions for Black males are not research studies but rather conceptual, theoretical, practice, or literature reviews.” Day-Vines (2023) further emphasized Steen et al.’s research point, arguing that the current state of school counseling studies addressing Black youth and educational success remains methodologically inadequate (e.g., small sample sizes, limited scope). Goodrich (2023) similarly asserted that Steen et al.’s review

helped to underscore the profound need for the field to shift its focus more empirically (compared to conceptually) and engage in scholarship to contribute to the process and outcome literature base of our field more intentionally in the hopes of supporting future practitioners (p. 26).

It is evident from these remarks, to improve the educational outcomes of Black male youth, the methodological issues limitations in the research must be meaningfully addressed by school counseling scholars.

Further Reflections and Closing Remarks

As indicated above, Steen et al. (2023) rely heavily on CRT as the conceptual foundation for their school-focused small group model. To augment CRT, I suggest that the model extends its underlying framework, incorporating more fully systems thinking (ecosystemic theory) into the design and implementation. Overall, educational research using systems theory provides the critical tools for leveraging educational gains within classrooms as well as elevating pedagogical quality and student engagement (Fuller & Kim, 2022). Ecosystemic studies with African American males “at-risk” for school failure have delineated the major factors influencing successful academic achievement (e.g., Goicoechea et al., 2014; Orrock & Clark, 2015). Specifically, meaningful family, school, and community involvement and collaboration are essential to increasing academic performance of Black youth. These findings and others could be synthesized and woven into the fabric of the Steen et al. group model.

Although the Steen et al. (2023) is certainly a strengths-based approach, I would encourage the model to build into its organizational structure and applications evidence-based interventions from the positive psychology literature. A meta-analysis of well-controlled studies recommended that counselors refine their interventions to the concerns and

preferences of clients/students deploying positive psychology exercises in combination with other evidence-based interventions (e.g., groupwork, mindfulness and forgiveness interventions, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, behavioral-activation exercises) to enhance psychological and subjective well-being (Bolier et al., 2013). In general, adolescent well-being is a vital building block to academic and social-emotional development (Bücker et al., 2018). Research reviews continue to document the value of positive psychology and associated interventions to the well-being and development of African Americans (e.g., Caldwell-Colbert et al., 2009; Mattis et al., 2016).

In conclusion, this special issue leads the way for continued dialogue among educators and school-based counselors about the importance of effective educational support of Black male youth through small groupwork. The focus article and the ensuing commentaries set the context well for this conversation and hopefully the broader application of the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model. Professionals and scholars need to address policy and assessment issues as well. Perhaps, these sample questions are germane to this discussion: In what ways might the Steen et al. (2023) group model be expanded and refined to incorporate suggestions by the commentators as well as other group counseling approaches devised for Black children and youth? What research projects need to be conducted to verify the efficacy of Steen et al. group model? How might multisystemic orientations and related interventions (e.g., multitiered systems of support) be incorporated more thoroughly into the Steen et al. group activities? In what ways could the model be deployed in other cultures and school systems around the world? How should education policies about serving Black youth in schools change to incorporate the work of Steen et al.? Again, I would encourage readers to explore these questions using Steen et al. and the associated commentaries as a starting point.

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