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A Commentary Response to the Article *Reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model to Focus on the Strengths of Black Male Middle School Youth*

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Abstract

The purpose of this commentary is to review the article *Reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model to Focus on the Strengths of Black Male Middle School Youth*. In the commentary, the author complements the article authors on their strong foundation of critical race theory, their attention to the current status of scholarship surrounding Black middle school students, as well as their notes about the need for more rigorous methodology in the future. The commentary author offers the article authors suggestions surrounding how they may better situate the Achieving Success Everyday group model for readers less familiar with it so that they can better understand and apply towards their future practice.

Keywords: Black, male, middle school, commentary, group counseling.

It was a pleasure to review the article “Reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model to Focus on the Strengths of Black Male Middle School Youth” (Steen et al., 2023). In the article, the authors provided a systematic review of current school counseling literature surrounding Black male youth, using critical race theory as a central framework for their analysis. After reviewing and critiquing the extant literature present within the field, they offered the Achieving Success Everyday (ACE) group model as a tool for schools, and school counselors, to address “racism and foster Black excellence” (Steen et al., 2023, p. 1) for Black middle school youth.

Specifically, the authors provided a strong foundation for readers about critical race theory (CRT) and its implementation in the education disciplines. It was striking, and a bit disheartening (although not surprising), to review the breadth and depth of CRT’s implementation across the disciplines, including the broader scholarship of education while recognizing near absence of CRT within the extant school counseling literature. In noting their greater review of CRT and its centrality in understandings the needs and experiences of Black students, they provided salient arguments regarding how our field-as-a-whole, and the training and practice of school counselors in particular, have systematically ignored or dismissed fundamentality important concepts and lived experiences of this population, which limits the possibility of culturally competent or responsive care for

underserved Black students in schools. Although implicit in their writing, I believe they set the foundation for their readers to see how structural issues, including systemic racism, within the field of counselor, and in particular, school counselor, education has likely influenced the knowledge, discourse, and training in our field to ignore crucial theories and writing which then serves to further perpetuate the challenges and issues Black youth face in schools. As a field that prides itself in multicultural and social justice (McCarthy et al., 2022; Ratts et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2012) work, this piece is a call to action for our field to better consider what we read, cite, as well as how we train and practice, if we wish to genuinely live up to what we state we value.

In their work, the authors deliberately guided readers to demonstrate the lack of work present within the field, while highlighting the 12 pieces of scholarship most closely aligned with their question. In doing so, they 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. This same issue has been raised by other group scholars (i.e., Goodrich & Van Horn, 2022), but the salience in seeing first-hand the existing scholarship and methods spelled out by the article’s authors drives this issue home. It was also disheartening to note the lack of attention to middle school Black boys, knowing that middle school tends to be the years when the greatest forms of bullying and other forms of interpersonal violence tends to show up in schools (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

I also greatly appreciated the authors’ perspective on methodology, highlighting the need to further bolster our methods, whether they be quantitative (McCarthy et al., 2017) or qualitative (Rubel & Okech, 2017), but also to ensure that the researchers pay close attention and highlight the distinctive cultural elements that also pervade the research (Rubel & Okech, 2017). Using these resources as a guidepost, I believe that group research would move further ahead in representing the Black male student voice missing from some of the articles cited in the metastudy the authors’ conducted, as well as support the field’s further understanding of culturally responsive counseling practice. Other authors in counselor education have even gone further, suggesting the need to include members of the communities under investigation as part of the research team, to ensure that the

community or communities are appropriately represented in the writing, and that distinctive cultural elements are not overlooked, or degraded, as part of the research process (e.g., Griffith et al., 2017). I do wonder about Steen et al.'s (2023) perspective on such an issue, as this is not an issue addressed directly by the authors. However, with the authors' focus on the absence of Black male voice in many published articles on this topic, their attention to systemic racism in education and educational literature, as well as their purpose to challenge the dominant ideology in the field about Black male students, I do wonder if ensuring represented members of the community, who have also engaged in this work, as part of the authorship team may be important to address some of the issues identified across this metastudy.

The only element that I wished the authors had better situated as part of their article was their call for readers to utilize the Achieving Success Everyday group model for school counseling. Although I am aware of this model and its utility within the particular populations under study, I did question if the readers of this article had enough information about the model to better understanding its original development and application in the field. For myself, the authors quickly jumped from the outcomes of their metastudy and directly moved into a revised application of the ASE model. I believe readers may have benefited from a greater overview of the model before the discussion of the revision took place. As novice readers to the discussion, they may not know the grounded theories grounding the ASE group, to see how a revision might nicely fit within the current model. Additionally, for those of us deeply committed to group work, I would have liked to see an increased focus on the group elements of the model's application. Recently, group scholars have discussed the need for articles about groups, and within group-specific journals, to highlight the important elements of groups, such as group leadership (characteristics, styles, and interventions), group dynamics, group processing, membership, and so on to better support practitioner-readers in knowing how the group in question might be replicated in different clinical settings, or with the same or different populations (Okech et al., 2022). Although I believe the authors provided a great deal of substance, and the table was so helpful to begin to see applications, I wondered if all readers would be as adept enough to see how to translate this important information in a group environment, versus their use of individual skills with individual members while other members vicariously learned from the interaction (or how we know groups sometimes do not function as true groups). Especially in thinking about the historically culturally marginalized nature of the population in question, preparing practitioners to be appropriate group leaders, whether they are part of this community or not, feels to me to be very important in supporting the larger theories and values embedded within this article. The art and technique of group work is so complex and important, and with the additional interaction of critical race theory and other grounding elements, it would be useful to support practitioners in better understanding how these elements may come together for a truly

responsive group environment. It should be noted, however, that these are not comments that should be taken as critique, but hopefully as a means to further develop and support this work moving forward. Overall, it was a joy to review the *Reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model to Focus on the Strengths of Black Male Middle School Youth* article, and I hope as readers we take this as a call to action for our field to better think about how we might, or may not, be serving the different communities with whom we engage.

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