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Damon D. Chambers  
*Western Michigan University*

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# **African American Adolescent Males' Experiences within the Education System: Implications for School Counseling Practice**

Damon D. Chambers

## Abstract

This article examines the literature on the experiences of African American adolescent males in the education system. The primary focus of the article is to explore the following: historical accounts dating back to the transatlantic slavery era; Disciplinary Disparities within the education system Postsecondary opportunities. Implications for counselor education and practice are discussed. The author concludes with recommendations to improve the experiences of African American adolescent males within the educational system.

*Key words:* African American adolescent male, education disparities, negative racial stereotypes.

## Introduction

Throughout history African American men and women have been forerunners in the strengthening of the United States. These accomplishments include but are not limited to new inventions, leading multiple reforms, overcoming obstacles and breaking down barriers, all of which impede a safe environment (Franklin & Moss, 2001). One of the most widely discussed topics since the 1970's has been African American adolescent males' place in society. Issues surrounding this topic include overrepresentation in special education and the school to prison pipeline, high school dropout, unemployment, incarceration and homicide rates. These sub-topics have placed African American adolescent males in the headlines as social scientist question if black males are at risk for danger within our society (Garibaldi, 2007).

Research shows that African American adolescent males are falling behind their female counterparts on most educational performance measures. This disparity includes low high school graduation rates and low college enrollment. When compared to other racial and ethnic groups, African American

adolescent males are losing educational and economical ground (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Most schools in the United States have failed to address the systems in place that create struggles for African American adolescent males. Historically, educational institutions and educators have been among the most active and effective instrument for oppression of African Americans (Thomas, Coard, Stevenson, Bentley, & Zamel, 2009). Schools and teachers need to be supported in meeting the needs of African American adolescent males. A critical competent of support includes increasing the ability of the school to contribute to African Adolescent males' development.

Researchers state that the achievement gap is both an observable and measurable discrepancy between the academic performance of African American Students and the performance of their Caucasian counterparts (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p. 120-147). According to one study, Research Center on Academic Success (2005), this gap can be observed and measured using a variety of variables, one such example is by examining grade point average (GPA). Pervious research has accurately documented the persistent patterns of negative educational outcome amongst African American adolescent males (Haycock, 2001; Ogbu, 2003). Additional related research has shown that psychological dysfunction is directly related to academic underachievement in African American Adolescent males (Gougis, 1986).

The experiences of young African American males in general are not being discussed or disseminated in the school counseling literature. As one conducts a survey the Journal of counseling and Development within the last 15 years, using "African American Adolescent males" as key words in publication title search, only 10 articles were the focus of attention. The same search was conducted via Professional School Counseling Journal and only one article was found. This

lack of information is an issue because the ethical guidelines states that school counselors should serve as an advocate for all students in accessing resources and postsecondary opportunities.

This is a further issue because there has been discussions in college and career readiness initiated by the White House on the urgency of African American education. There is a need for school counselors to be on board with this current movement. The basic experiences of African American Adolescent males within the education system are missing. The purpose of this article is to discuss the experiences of African American Adolescent males in our education system in the United States. Implications for the counseling profession will be discussed.

### **Literature Review History of African American Adolescent Males**

The lived experience of slavery continues to oppress the lives of African American adolescent males today. Although the interaction and intermixing between Europeans and Africans is a long-complicated affair, the racial constructs of masculinity from the transatlantic slave trade are still present today (Palmer, 2006). Wallace (2007) asked the question, "Are we MEN?" but later answered through the history of racial reform by prominent figures within the black male community. These prominent men demonstrated independence, political literacy, ownership of property, and attainment of social degree through inheritance (Wallace, 2007). African American youth's history of hardship, inferiority and lack of educational opportunities are linked back to the transatlantic slave trade.

There was a turn in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries of how black males are viewed. This was due to their outstanding performance in sports, popular music, politics, the military and the entertainment industry. Palmer (2007) captured this revelation of the perception of "Good Negros" who demonstrated competence in alliance with their white

counterparts. This positive media attention did not last very long as white men were threatened by black males who were making a difference in society. Soon the media would begin to portray black males as a community in crisis. Black males were now reported to be performing at lower educational levels, missing from the family structure (as evidenced by a high rate of female-headed black families), and were seen generally as drug addicts, as having high rates of suicide, and responsible for initiating the AIDS epidemic. These issues and others placed black males in a category of being perceived as problematic and as a liability to society (Palmer, 2007).

In a study conducted by Campbell, (2006) he states that women and children comprised 25 % of the slave workforce of the North American Colonies. He further recorded that healthy children were highly sought after to be slaves in the United States and other regions of the Americas, as they were more likely to survive the Journey when compared to adults. According to Pargas, (2011) the reality for children born to African American Slaves was different. He states that slave children spent much of their time playing among themselves or with their white counterparts. As they grew older some were assigned minor chores. Pasierowska, (2016) study states that things started to change around age 10 for an African American Child. Some scholars have evidenced that other African Americans start working in the field as early as age 8 (Campbell 2006; Pargas 2011).

Some of the changes experienced by African American children during slavery, as they grew older, they were task with taking care of their younger infant brothers and sister, working for the slave master by sleeping on their bedroom floor or even performing light chores like collecting trash and stones on the estate (Paragas 2011). Some children were initially valued as quarter or half –hands, but as they grew older they were substitutes for adult workers and eventually replaced them. Children were seen as the property of slave owners and were subject to authority

punishment and possible separation from their parents.

Children became immune to separation as the cycle continues throughout their youthful days. Pasierowska (2016) states that at age 10 some African American Children begin to question their identity when they perceived that they were slaves. This psychological journey for enslaved children led to believe that they were inferior from their white playmates. Many children see themselves as different when white children attended school for the first time and leave them behind. Campbell (2011) states that slave children experienced feelings of difference and inequality, which is a common instance when children realized they were enslaved. This realization prompts enslaved children to enter a transition from innocence to recognition of not being a free individual but a slave (Pasierowska 2016).

The views of education during slavery for enslaved children continue to have implications today. Since going to school was not an option for enslaved children, they were often found learning from their white playmates that taught them how to read (Campbell 2006). This was not an option for everyone since boys were less likely to be assisting in the house. Girls were more likely to learn how to read and were often found with books on the plantation (Pagaras 2011).

Education for slave children was a huge topic entering the Nineteenth Century. According to Henry (2013), the passage of Brown V. Board of Education placed African American children at a disadvantage when compared to their white counterparts. May 17, 2016 will mark 60 years since the inception of segregating public schools by race. This history of segregation continues to contribute to the experiences of African American adolescent males. According to Rothstein (2014), black children are more racially and socioeconomically isolated today than at any other time since 1970. He argues that inequalities still exist, although the numbers may be smaller today than 46 years ago. African

American children are exposed to segregation because some communities in which schools are located are segregated (Rothstein, 2014).

Historically, low expectations for academic achievement of black males by classroom teachers have also contributed to the challenges faced by African American adolescent males today. In a study conducted in New Orleans Public Schools during the 1986-1987 school year, African American males accounted for 65% of total suspensions, 80% of all expulsions, 58% of non-promotions and 45% of dropouts (Garibaldi, 2007). A similar study conducted in 2009 in the Chicago Public School system found African American males had a 35% lower graduation rate than whites and Hispanics, and a 61% high school dropout rate respectively (Mezuk, 2009). This same study found that 25% of African American males researched read below the basic level and nearly 40% of those who graduated high school lacked literacy skills required by employers. These findings have laid the groundwork for further ridicule from the media and others in society. For some, this is a confirmation of their views on African American adolescent males within the educational system (Knapp, Reid, Grinder, 2009).

### **Disciplinary Disparities**

Teacher's student relationship of African American students in secondary school setting that are viewed as dysfunctional is not a small issue (Neal, McCray, Webb- Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Hunter (2015) gives several examples of teachers bias in the classroom toward African American students. She states that school discipline procedures have a direct connection to hierarchies of race and color. Further, Thomas, Coard, Stevenson, Bentley, & Zamel, (2009) state that teachers' racial basis has led to the disproportionate reports of behavioral adjustment problems in the classroom for African American males. The same study pointed out that teachers' negative perceptions and expectations of African American males have led to rating higher in

behavioral and academic problems when compared to White children.

Many researchers have highlighted a plethora of inequalities that exist in the discipline of African American boys in schools. For example, Kim, Losen, & Hewitt (2010) states that African American boys are more likely to be removed from the classroom, more likely to experience school suspension and more likely to be expelled from school all together. Moore (2009) emphasized the increased use of school police at Black and Latina/o schools to re-enforce juvenile justice policies passed by legislature. He argued that this practice has significantly increased the disproportionate discipline of students of color. There is evidence that these school disciplinary procedures are linked to the juvenile justice system. According to (Ferguson, 2000) imbalanced school discipline rates have overwhelming implications for the incarceration rates of students of color. Students who experience formal discipline at school are significantly more likely to be incarcerated in the adult criminal justice system (Civil Right Project, 2000).

African American Adolescent males have been subjected to racial bias and racism in general within the school system, which causes psychological stress. According to Harrell (2000) race related stress is the direct result of chronic and continuous exposure to racist events and interactions. African American Adolescent males who are constantly exposed to an atmosphere with racially threatening stimuli are likely to experience mental and emotional stress related symptoms. It has been empirically documented by past researchers that race related stress has a direct link between psychological distress (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). When elevated stress is experienced, the result has a direct relationship on adolescent behavior. Nyborg & Curry (2003) espoused that African American adolescent males who reported being exposed to constant racism regularly are diagnosed with several mental health issues.

### **Post-Secondary Opportunities**

The debate over what can be done to make education equal for all students, especially African Americans who continue to struggle, is a major topic in many circles. The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, an executive order issued in 2012 from President Obama, provides a trajectory in the form of a national policy regarding African American education. Some of the missions of the policy include: a decrease in the disproportionate number of referrals of African American children to special education; a reduction in the dropout rates of African American students, coupled with effective support to help them graduate high school; increasing college access for African American students; and enhancing the educational and life opportunities of African Americans through family and community. (*White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans*, 2012)

This initiative, has increase a surge of research interest and momentum around the potential for change. One such leading notion is that of college and career readiness. According to Bryant (2013), College and career readiness will require changes within the education system. It has been identified through research that the education system is not currently doing the best job in ensuring equality for all children. This is particularly true for high-poverty and high-minority schools, which contain high rates of African American males. In 2014, Barber's study states that college and career readiness programs are still using traditional high stakes testing which has historically served to eliminate students of color from college enrollment opportunities, especially African American males. This tradition of testing as an indicator for readiness is supported by the dominant culture.

Equalizing college and career readiness opportunities continues to be a major focus of the education reform movement. Although this remains true, racial disparity is still an issue. According to the US Department of Education, the percentage of Black students enrolled in college between 1976 and 2012 rose

from 10 percent to 15 percent, compared to white students whose enrollment numbers decreased from 84 percent to 60 percent. The discussion on lack of college and career readiness for African American students is placed on the students' families and attributed to communities' deficits. Bryant (2014) argues that equal discussion and focus should be given to the impact of deficiencies and disparities of the school systems, especially those with high-minority students, not only laying this responsibility at the feet of families and communities.

School counselors have also adopted programs geared toward college and career readiness. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) is on board through the development of mindsets & behaviors for student's success. According to *ASCA* (2014), these mindsets and behaviors are based on review of research and college and career readiness documents throughout the years with suggested strategies to improve students' achievement. However, there is no evidence that suggests that these mindsets have made a significant change in the lives of African American students. Schiness & Todd (2014) state that findings suggest that stakeholders of our education system should be helped to understand the importance of early interventions in the expectation and preparation to enter college. As school counselors, ongoing data and the ability to analyze the results can produce much change in the student body (Notestine, 2015). Lack of preparation for postsecondary opportunities places African American Adolescent males at a disadvantage when compared to other racial groups.

### **Discussion**

This article has examined the literature regarding the experiences of African American adolescent males in our education system. The literature reveals that while several solutions have been suggested, educators have not followed through to achieve success. African American adolescent males are told that there are boundless opportunities and that they must

play by the rules to achieve them. It is clear throughout the literature that the ancestral experience of slavery continues to impact young African American males creating current experiences of oppression, marginalization, and racism.

The high school dropout and unemployment rates of young African American males continue to be a major concern. Many are not able to sustain jobs because they lack the skills employers require. It was clear from the literature that this is one of the main frustrations within the young African American male population. This finding underscores that African Americans are not provided with even ground from the start. Lack of advocacy, insight, and poor leadership in governmental economical strategies to alleviate the cause has led to the repetitive production of inequality and an uneven playing field for young African American males.

Institutional racism can be dismantled with all hands-on deck. The data has proven that young African American males are in crisis, and plunging deeper each day. It is clear in the literature that cultural awareness of those who work in institutions that can produce sustainable change should be examined, and in most cases, improved. One place to start is to understand what many of these students encounter in their daily lives. The earlier in life this is started, the more likely it is to decrease the levels of worry about being victims of violent crimes, being treated unfairly by the police and being victims of racial discrimination. Education plays a significant role in economic stability of any individuals who have equal opportunities to what it offers. Many researchers in the literature alluded to the disadvantages young African American males face without a solid education.

### **Implications for Counselor Education Research and Practice**

The literature review revealed that the lives of some African American adolescent males are not improving in general due to many variables beyond their control. Racism and

marginalization have had a severe impact on their social and emotional well-being. It is from this background that many seek the help of school counselors when they feel hopeless and helpless in the school setting. Those who are high school dropouts or in post-secondary categories may seek counseling from other community agencies where accessible. Counselors have an ethical responsibility to provide treatment in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental environment so as not to cause harm to clients. School counselors are ethically bound to provide advocacy for policy changes to address the experiences of all students in the education system.

School counselors are in a position of power to lead the charge to advocate for equality and social justice for all students. Lack of knowledge of African American cultural norms and multicultural incompetence among counselors in general creates the risk of misdiagnosis. Clients are aware when counselors are uncomfortable and unwilling to uncover or probe for problems that are below the surface.

School counselors should be aware of the impact of the negative historical legacy on African American children who are seen as inferior and not possessing higher order thinking. These beliefs must be challenged through leadership and advocacy through assessment and evaluation of their daily functioning. School counselors must watch for warning signs of distress among young African American males and render practical solutions to help bring about stability and balance. It is important for counselors to challenge their own value systems, attitudes and inaccurate negative stereotypical perceptions of African American adolescent males. Counselor competence is important when working with this population to ensure information is communicated in ways both culturally and developmentally appropriate and avoid harm and value imposition.

Counselor educators who are engaged in training of emerging counselors should be aware of the issues faced by African Americans

adolescent males and explore collaborative ways to address these issues within our schools. Counselor educators should ensure that Counseling students are aware of disparities within the system and help students develop intentional goals to address this problem when hired as a counselor in the school system. Counselors within our schools must build trust for sharing of stories to take place between them and African American adolescent male students. African American adolescent male student voices are missing from the literature. School counselors need to be supported to contribute to the needs of Black male development.

### **Conclusion**

This study has not described all the experiences of African American adolescent males, but has highlighted some salient points for counselors and educators to consider. The state of African American adolescent males deteriorates each day that passes without an intentional roadmap to address and correct these issues. It is recommended that more studies be done to capture the lived experiences of African American adolescent males to collectively establish their voice in the counselor education literature and in society in general.

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