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Disrupting White Hegemony: A Critical Shift Toward Empowering Black Male Youth Through Group Work

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Abstract

Despite the unique and pressing needs of Black male students in schools, there has been a significant gap in the availability of culturally responsive group counseling models to support and empower this population. In this commentary article, I discuss the theory and research underlying the ASE group model for Black male middle school youth. Drawing on Steen et al. (2023) use of Critical Race Theory for reconceptualizing the ASE group model, I expound on the concept of white hegemony in school counseling. School counselors may unconsciously impose white cultural norms and values on students, hindering the effectiveness of the ASE model. To counteract white hegemony, I propose several strategies for creating a more inclusive, healing, and growth centered group environment.

Keywords: culturally responsive group counseling, Critical Race Theory, school counseling, Black boys, middle school

Black male students have historically been underserved due to various factors, including systemic racism and discrimination. Research has shown that they are disproportionately suspended and expelled, are more likely to be placed in special education classes, and receive less effective instruction (Gage et al., 2019; Whitaker et al., 2019). Opportunity gaps persist among Black students and affect their access to equal resources and opportunities, including advanced classes, mental health supports, and extracurricular activities (Gon Ochi et al., 2020; Kettler & Hurst, 2017; Whitaker et al., 2019).

School counselors are responsible for ensuring that all students have access to equitable opportunities for academic, social emotional, and career development (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022). Accordingly, school counselors can play a critical role in supporting Black male students by providing direct support, creating a more inclusive and culturally responsive school environment, and advocating for systemic change and equity. In their article “*Reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday Group Counseling Model to Focus on the Strengths of Black Male Middle School Youth*,” Steen et al. (2023) use a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective to reexamine school-based programs and interventions that have been published in the school counseling literature with Black males as participants and examine the role school counselors took when supporting Black males students’ academic, social emotional and career identity development. This

analysis aims to address a long-overdue question: to what extent does school counseling literature address the needs of Black males in K-12 schools? These findings serve as the basis for reconceptualizing the Achieving Success Everyday (ASE) group model.

Critical Race Theory

CRT is an intellectual movement and a framework for examining how race and racism intersect with other forms of oppression and privilege in society while simultaneously addressing the hegemonic system of white supremacy (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). CRT scholars examine how laws and social institutions are used to maintain racial inequality and how these systems can be challenged and transformed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT also emphasizes the importance of understanding the lived experiences of people of color and how race shapes their lives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT is interdisciplinary and draws on fields such as law, sociology, history, and political science.

CRT aligns well with educational settings as it examines the influence of race on students (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Moore et al., 2008). Several scholars in the field of education have applied critical race theory to education, including Ladson-Billings (1998), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), and Solorzano and Yosso (2000). It scrutinizes the ongoing systems that contribute to the marginalization of specific communities (Hiraldo, 2010; Yosso, 2005). When applied to a systematic literature review such as Steen et al. (2023), CRT can be used as a methodological tool to help identify and critique how race and racism are addressed (or not addressed) in the literature as well as highlight the experiences of marginalized groups that may be excluded from traditional research (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). A CRT lens can also assist in identifying how power and privilege shape the production and dissemination of knowledge (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). To date, school counseling research has been inadequate in incorporating this approach.

Group Counseling and The Invisibility of Black Males

Steen and colleagues (2023) employ a CRT perspective to revisit the literature on school counseling and interventions for Black male students to reconceptualize the ASE framework for Black males. The application of CRT to school counseling is timely; research that highlights inequities can provide valuable data to inform decisions by policymakers, researchers, and practitioners about how to address and

prevent these issues (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). Results from this review indicate that most scholarly works on school counseling interventions for Black males are not research studies but conceptual, theoretical, practice, or literature reviews (Steen et al., 2023). Further, the voices and experiences of Black male students are not well represented in discussions about the impact of school counseling services. These findings suggest that more research and representation of their perspectives are needed to provide effective and culturally responsive counseling services to Black males.

Reconceptualizing the ASE Group Counseling Model

The reimagined ASE group model draws from the limited but important literature on group counseling for Black males, which emphasizes centering Blackness, including cultural heritage, and fostering an appreciation for oneself as both Black and male. Centering Blackness has the potential to counteract the damaging effects of white supremacy and racism on Black males by valuing, affirming, and empowering their voices, perspectives, and experiences. The revised model also concertedly focuses on postsecondary success, positive identity development, racial pride, and academic and social self-understanding (Steen et al., 2023). By concentrating on these aspects, the ASE group counseling model could help Black males develop a greater understanding of themselves and their place in the world. The ASE model also maintains and leverages its existing strengths that are well-suited to support Black males, such as addressing topics of race and racism, broaching cultural differences between leader and members with intentionality, using quantitative and qualitative measurement tools, and emphasizing partnerships between school, family, and community.

White Hegemony in School Counseling

The ASE model is a significant step forward in providing a model for culturally responsive group counseling for Black males. Steen and colleagues (2023) contend that it is impossible to counter racism and white supremacy for Black male youth in school counseling if the interventions and practices do not directly address or challenge it. I concur with the authors that it is essential to confront racism and white supremacy. However, school counselors could benefit from additional strategies to assist in applying ASE. To honor and engage Black males' culture, experiences, and community, the school counseling field must critically assess how whiteness informs and shapes school counseling policies, practices, and research methods. This is of particular importance if we are to provide culturally responsive services for Black male youth in a profession that is predominantly White and female (ASCA, 2020). CRT provides conceptual frameworks to examine how race and racism have been institutionalized and sustained. Drawing and extending on the author's application of CRT, I posit that to center Blackness for male students, we need to de-center whiteness. To do so, we must identify and name the hidden curriculum of whiteness in school counseling. White supremacy and white privilege are

distinct but interrelated concepts. According to Leonardo (2004), for white privilege to exist, it must be supported by a system of racial domination. In other words, while white privilege refers to the benefits white people receive from racism, white supremacy is the systemic maintenance of the dominant position that creates white privilege. Thus, white supremacy is more central and focuses on the processes that secure domination (Leonardo, 2004, p. 137). Whiteness is a belief system that upholds white supremacy, prioritizing one racial group above others.

When whiteness is not acknowledged or examined in school counseling, it is then treated as the default or neutral perspective. *Hegemony* is a concept used in social and political theory to describe the dominance of one group or society over others (Lears, 1985). The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci first coined the term and refers to the ways in which a ruling class or dominant group maintains its power and influence over other groups in society (Lears, 1985). *Cultural hegemony* refers to the dominance of certain ideas, values, and beliefs in a society, which are often promoted by the ruling class or dominant group (Lears, 1985). These ideas are then internalized by members of other groups, who come to accept them as natural or normal, thus reinforcing the dominance of the ruling class. Arredondo et al. (2020) contend that little has changed in the counseling profession: white counseling students still mostly have white professors, multicultural counseling is still only a one-semester course, and theories that are taught are Eurocentric and outdated.

The ASE group model prioritizes being mindful of cultural differences and broaching race, ethnicity, and culture. If school counselors are to lead culturally responsive groups effectively, school counselors of all races, ethnicities, and cultural groups benefit from examining how whiteness and white supremacy permeate the group counseling experience. According to Okun (n.d.), white supremacy culture trains us all to internalize attitudes and behaviors that do not serve us. Despite its impact on the racial dynamics in educational settings (Battey & Leyva, 2016; Berchini, 2019; Hess, 2021), the concept of whiteness and white supremacy have not been extensively documented in the school counseling literature (Bayne et al., 2021).

Challenging the Hidden Curriculum in School Counseling

School counseling practices and policies must recognize how whiteness shapes the counseling experience for Black males. When whiteness is not acknowledged, it can result in a lack of understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Black males and make it challenging to identify and address issues of bias and discrimination within the counseling process. The reconceptualization of the ASE model is a vital step in countering the hidden curriculum of white hegemony. Steen and colleagues (2023) prompted me to consider additional strategies for disrupting white hegemony in group counseling through the ASE model.

Renaming and Reframing the Deficit Lens in Group Counseling

School counseling educators and practitioners must rename and reframe the concept of group counseling to emphasize strengths and empower individuals, moving away from a deficit perspective. Deficit thinking serves as a tool that maintains hegemonic systems (Davis & Museus, 2019). Steen and colleagues (2023) frequently reference “group interventions” for Black males. Their use of the term “intervention” might be appropriate in the context of the article examining studies applying control and intervention or treatment groups. However, it encouraged reflection on the usage of the term among school counseling practitioners when describing the services they offer. The use of the term “group intervention” amongst practitioners implies a problem or deficit that needs to be addressed. This deficit perspective suggests that the person or group being intervened with is lacking in some way and needs outside help to improve. This approach ignores the harm done by existing systems, policies, and practices and can send strong signals to students about the institution’s perception of their ability to succeed (Valencia, 2010). This language can be stigmatizing and can reinforce harmful stereotypes and biases rather than promoting a strengths-based, empowering approach. School counselors and counselor educators should consider reframing how school counseling hopes to “intervene” for Black males.

The ASE model is designed to draw on Black males’ inherent strengths. Rather than viewing this group as an intervention to address deficits, school counselors should view the ASE group model as an ideal framework for support groups, racial affinity groups, and growth groups. *Support groups* consist of a small community of people who meet regularly to gain and provide support in overcoming a common issue or occurrence (Gladding, 2019). *Racial affinity groups* offer affirmation of identity, empowerment of the individual, and empowerment of the group within the learning community (Parson & Ridley, 2012). A *growth group* is one in which the members are given the opportunity to explore and develop personal goals related to awareness of feelings about self and others, improve interpersonal communications, and assess personal values (Masson & Jacobs, 1980). These groups are characterized by providing scaffolded support to students’ growth and development and building upon what the student already knows, all of which aligns with the ASE model.

The Inside Out Work of Group Leadership

School counselors must prepare themselves to become emotionally conscious, culturally responsive group leaders. According to Hammond (2014), “before you can leverage diversity as an asset in the classroom, you must reflect on the challenges that can interfere with open acceptance of students who are different from you in background, race, class, language, or gender” (p. 53). The same holds true for group counseling spaces. She identifies strategies for improving

culturally responsive practices of educators, which include (a) identifying your cultural frames of reference; (b) widening your cultural aperture; and (c) identifying your key triggers. School counselors must reflect on how their cultural values shape their expectations.

The ASE model consists of group processes such as establishing ground rules, developing group goals, giving and receiving feedback, modeling appropriate behaviors, and communication skills. Before implementing the ASE group model, school counselors must reflect on how their values shape how they expect Black boys to behave socially and communicate in group discussions. How were you trained to respond to different emotional expressions? How were you expected to engage with authority figures? How were you taught to communicate? To counter white hegemony, school counselors must expand their interpretation of student behaviors and recognize how other cultures communicate and socialize. Lastly, school counselors must be able to identify the elements of social interactions that can be triggering and identify strategies for managing their feelings.

Fostering Strengths Through Community Cultural Wealth

The ASE model is crafted to approach groups for Black males with a strength-based and school counselors could utilize the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model as an added lens to achieving this goal. I agree with the authors’ assertion that many school counseling interventions fail to provide culturally grounded or race-based theoretical perspectives to challenge the deficit lens. Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) is rooted in CRT and challenges the notion that students of Color lack the necessary resources to succeed in academia (Yosso, 2005). While CCW originated in higher education, school counselors can apply its tenets to assisting secondary students, particularly Black males, to identify their strengths. Yosso (2005) introduces six forms of capital that often go unnoticed or undervalued. *Aspirational capital* refers to the perseverance of future aspirations despite obstacles; *Familial capital* encompasses cultural knowledge passed down within families and emphasizes the importance of maintaining a strong connection to one’s community; *Linguistic capital* highlights the diverse language skills students bring to academia; *Social capital* refers to the networks of individuals and community resources for support; *Navigational capital* refers to the ability to maneuver through institutions where students of Color are underrepresented; and *Resistance capital* encompasses the skills developed through opposing unjust circumstances. The Cultural Wealth and Career Narrative handout (University of Portland Career Education Center, n.d.) helps students reflect on their strengths and abilities regarding future careers. It can be adapted for use in the ASE group aimed at Black males.

Student Agency

To counter white hegemony, school counselors must empower students by giving them agency and allowing them to

take an active role in their growth and self-discovery. The reconceptualized ASE model challenges us to consider how we create groups that allow students to drive decision making. One approach may include students as co-researchers, not merely the objects of research. School counselors could incorporate youth participatory action research (YPAR) into their ASE groups for Black males (Mayes et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2010). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) initiatives provide a platform for young individuals to enhance their sociocultural consciousness, critical thinking skills, and sense of control within a group setting that emphasizes collaboration (Smith et al., 2010). YPAR is a method of research where young people work together as researchers to examine and tackle problems that affect them directly, including intersectional racism (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). School counselors can utilize their position as ASE group leaders to provide opportunities for students to voice their needs and to influence policy and procedural changes that promote systemic change in the school environment (Mayes et al., 2022). The collaborative nature of the ASE model, where students can process ideas about their identity on their terms and the incorporation of family, school and community support is ideal for YPAR.

Conclusion

The ASE group counseling model can effectively support Black male students, especially when additional strategies are integrated. The model provides a framework for culturally responsive groups that center Blackness. School counselors can further challenge white hegemony and promote equity and inclusion in the school setting by reframing the deficit-based perspective of group counseling, engaging in self-reflection about implicit biases, and creating opportunities for student agency.

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