

# INCREASING REPRESENTATION OF BLACK MEN IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY THROUGH EARLY EXPOSURE

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## **Abstract:**

Black men are glaringly underrepresented in school psychology preparation programs and the profession. In the larger field of education, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are working to recruit and prepare Black male students to become educators. However, there are no targeted initiatives or research focused on recruiting and training Black men to become school psychologists. Efforts to increase Black men educators can provide insight into recruiting and preparing Black male students to become school psychologists. This commentary argues that Black male high school and college students need early exposure to school psychology preparation programs and career pathways to increase their representation.

**Keywords:** *Black men school psychologists, Black male high school students, recruitment, early exposure*

Black men are absent from the national conversation about the critical shortage of school psychologists. There has been a persistent shortage of school psychologists, in general, and from diverse backgrounds, specifically, since the field's inception (Bocanegra et al., 2017). There has never been a time when the supply of school psychologists was sufficient to meet the demand in school systems and the needs of diverse student populations. Scholarly literature has emerged that focuses on recruiting minorities and graduate students of color in school psychology preparation programs and the profession to address the critical shortage, lack of representation, and diversity (Bocanegra, Gubi, et al., 2016; Bocanegra, Newell, et al., 2016). However, this body of work has not explicitly focused on Black men in school psychology educational and career pathways.

The lack of focus on Black men poses a significant threat to Black male students who are persistently underserved in schools. It is well documented in the literature that Black male students are disproportionately represented in special education, overrepresented in lower-level and remedial classes, and receive the highest number of disciplinary infractions, suspension, and expulsion from schools (Cook et al., 2018; Goings et al., 2018), issues that are acute in urban schools. The predominantly White middle-class school psychologist profession has played a significant role in the institutionalized issues that Black boys face in education. While we recognize that the aforesaid issues are systemic inequities that impact Black boys throughout the Pre-K–12 school pipeline, we firmly believe that recruiting more Black men in school psychology can offer culturally grounded perspectives of issues plaguing Black boys and their families in schools.

School psychologists are instructional support personnel who work with students, families, teachers, school administrators, and other stakeholders to support students' learning in a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). Unfortunately, most Black male students in schools are not safe, healthy, and supportive spaces to learn (Howard, 2013, 2014). School psychologists are often charged with administering different types of tests in achievement, academic or emotional intelligence, aptitude, personality, attitude, neuropsychological, projective, and conduct direct observations and interviews that negatively impact Black boys and young men. This article offers commentary on supporting and increasing Black men's representation in school psychology professional preparation programs and career fields.

## **Lack of Diversity in School Psychology Preparation Programs and Profession**

Since being recognized as a profession, there has been a shortage of school psychologists, and researchers predict that this will continue (Bocanegra et al., 2017). There is a lack of diversity in graduate programs and the profession. Over 80% of the graduate students and professionals in school psychology are White (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016). These professionals are primarily responsible for school psychologists' policies, standards, positions, and practices. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recognizes that the shortage of school psychologists in graduate education programs and the profession is a complex issue impacted by geographical location, context, and services provided to students who need them. While the NASP recognizes that racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity issues exist and need to be addressed, we argue that there is an evident absence of targeted recruitment on specific groups, especially Black men. Scholars

in the broader field of school psychology have examined targeted groups, but there is no specific focus on Black men. We argue that there need to be targeted and nuanced efforts to get more Black men into school psychology programs.

### **Special Education as Insight Into School Psychology in Research on Black Men Educators**

Over the last 20 years, research on Black men educators has evolved and expanded to provide insight into their reasons for becoming teachers, preparation, professional experiences, pedagogy, and impact on students (Davis et al., 2018; Lewis & Toldson, 2013). Families, teachers, tutoring, and teaching experiences have been critical elements in encouraging Black men to become educators. Traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs have been the primary methods used to produce Black men educators. These educators have a wide range of professional experiences, including years in the teacher workforce and urban, suburban, and rural settings with diverse students.

Scott has led the charge with discussions about the recruitment and preparation of Black men special education teachers (Scott, 2016, 2019; Scott & Alexander, 2019). In 2016, Scott made a clarion call asking the critical question, "Where are all the Black male special education teachers?" This question is vital as Black men special education teachers are the closest population and special education is the closest discipline to gain insight into Black men school psychologists. Scott (2019) reported (a) the reasons they chose special education alternate routes, (b) effective program components, (c) program exit supports, (d) funding, (e) targeted recruitment, and (f) mentoring from Black faculty were among essential factors for the recruitment and retention of Black men special education teachers.

Scholars have provided recommendations for getting more Black men teachers into special education programs (Scott, 2016; Scott & Alexander, 2019). Scott (2016) asserted that (a) funding priorities need to be made for Black men in teacher education programs, (b) Black men in special education need higher pay and compensation, (c) investments need to be made earlier to get Black male students to consider special education, (d) innovative and alternative programs are needed to recruit and prepare Black male students to become teachers.

Research about Black men school psychologists is practically non-existent, and there is a need for studies of this population. Gleaning insight from the research of Black men special education teachers, Black men school psychologists may desire to challenge the status quo of Black male students in special education, cultural stereotypes about disabilities, and may have personal connections to someone with a disability. Providing prospective Black men school psychologists with tuition financial support, expedited degree or licensing (e.g., 12 months or less), flexible courses and scheduling (e.g., online, after work), and diverse mentors and advisors may help to prepare them. Black men school psychologists could benefit from support systems, competitive salaries, advanced education and career advancement opportunities, autonomy to culturally grounded curriculum, and disciplinary tools and assessments. Lastly, there is a need for a pipeline of Black men school psychologists starting early in high school.

### **Early Exposure and Education About School Psychology in High School and Undergraduate Studies**

The NASP (2016) has guided recruiting prospective students into school psychology graduate programs and the professions. The organization has provided specific recommendations for high school and college students to be recruited into school psychology. These recommendations are generalized to high school and undergraduate populations regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, and/or gender. If the goal is to recruit Black male high school and undergraduate students into school psychology, we firmly believe that the solutions must be tailored specifically to them.

#### **Recruiting and Preparing Black Male High School Students**

The NASP (2016) advocates for early awareness as a recruitment strategy for high school students. The organization provided specific recommendations for high school students: (a) incorporate school psychology in advanced placement (AP) psychology courses; (b) increase the visibility of school psychologist's role within schools; (c) provide students with scholarships and recognition who show a commitment to pursuing graduate school psychology preparation; (d) offer students with career mentoring; and (e) encourage students early involvement in school psychology professional organizations.

We agree with these recommendations but think they should be contextualized based on Black male students. For instance, Black male students are underrepresented in advanced placement courses, in general, and psychology, specifically (Whiting & Ford, 2009). School psychologists should join other scholars and educators in other disciplines to advocate for young Black men to access AP courses. Moreover, there is no evidence that teachers have incorporated school psychology into AP psychology courses. Most young men are not adequately educated about school psychology careers and graduate preparation. We believe that efforts to provide young men with career mentoring should come from Black men school psychologists online or in-person

to help them better understand what it means to be Black and a man in this discipline. Given the shortage of Black men school psychologists, pairing students with Black men school psychologists or candidates may be a challenge, but we think the effort should be made because it is a vital career mentoring component. School psychology is a White, women-dominated field (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016), and based on the conditions of Black boys and men (Howard, 2013, 2014), the field can be perceived as being unwelcome to them.

Scholarship focused on exposing Black male high school students to the teaching profession is growing (Goings & Bianco, 2016). However, there is no research on efforts to expose and educate them to the school psychology profession. Most school systems have college and career pathways for students to be exposed, educated, and encouraged to participate in experiential learning opportunities in education. These are the closest pathway to school psychology that Black students may get the chance to learn about this educational and career track. The focus on increasing the number of Black men teachers may supersede efforts to improve their representation in the school psychology field. Moreover, school psychology may or may not be listed on the possible college and career options for students to consider. They may have limited exposure to the school psychologist candidate or professional.

College and career professionals must increase efforts to expose and educate Black male high school students to educational preparation programs and career paths in school psychology. Most young Black men do not know what a school psychologist is unless they have had direct experiences working with one. Even if they had exposure to a school psychologist, they probably left the encounter unsure about what they do. Moreover, most Black male high school students have not been appropriately educated about school psychology majors and career options to consider going to college to study it.

In 2018, the NASP African American subcommittee introduced what is now known as the NASP exposure project, an initiative that focuses on addressing shortages in the field and intentionally recruiting diverse populations in a profession primarily served by White women workers. We strongly recommend that Black male high school students be exposed to school psychology educational and professional tracks, Black men school psychologist candidates, and professionals. We also recommend that high school-based education programs focus on recruiting young Black men into school psychology alongside efforts to grow them in the teaching profession. This recommendation should not be seen as a competition between the teaching and school psychology profession but an opportunity to expand the career and educational options for Black men in education. As Black men, we believe that a unified recruitment approach is needed instead of a competitive one to welcome impressionable and undecided Black men into multiple educational fields that need them and their unique perspective.

### **Recruiting and Preparing Black Men Collegians**

The NASP (2016) advocates for early awareness as a recruitment strategy for college students. The organization provided specific recommendations for undergraduate students: (a) increase exposure to school psychology through advising; (b) increase exposure to school psychology through coursework; (c) encourage involvement in state and national school psychology organizations; (d) increase school psychology presence in undergraduate textbooks; (e) allow undergraduate psychology majors to complete internship requirement in school psychology; (f) engage students in undergraduate research; (g) create and deliver specialized presentations about school psychology to undergraduates; and (h) encourage interdisciplinary collaborations across educational professions.

We agree with these recommendations but think they should be conceptualized for Black men collegians. The advising structure varies at different higher education institutions. In some institutions, advising is handled by professional advisors before students are advised by faculty or specialized advisors in their discipline. Strayhorn (2015), one of the leading researchers focusing on Black men, argues that advising is critical to their academic success. He also contends that academic advisors must serve as cultural navigators for students and are essential in determining which activities or experiences will help them arrive at their intended goals (e.g., right major, classes, internship) or destination (e.g., school psychology).

We agree with the NASP that Black men undergraduates need to be exposed to school psychology through coursework, textbooks, internships, and undergraduate research. Scholars have found success in other education areas by centering Black men in undergraduate research experiences (Davis et al., 2020; Woodward & Howard, 2015). These same principles should apply to school psychology. In their academic experiences, Black men collegians should be provided the opportunity to engage in coursework, internships, and research experiences with Black men college professors and professionals in school psychology, psychology, or related fields.

Given that Black men are underrepresented in most educational career pathways, we strongly recommend cross-discipline collaborations with other Black men scholars and practitioners to expose students to education careers. Another critical element of this collaboration is that Black men's educational and professional lives become a central part of the curriculum or text they must learn about the field.

Higher education administrators and faculty play a significant role in providing professional preparation to produce high-quality Black men school psychologists and increase their representation in the field. Many school psychology program components must be addressed for Black men to be represented and prepared to contribute to the discipline. All school psychology programs are at the graduate level, which complicates the pathway of a high school or college student interested in joining the field because they cannot major in it during their undergraduate studies. It is highly recommended that school psychologists earn their bachelor's degree in psychology or a related field in undergrad. Although entry-level school psychology positions exist for graduates with a bachelor's degree, most states require school psychologists to have 60 or more graduate credits in school psychology and complete an internship of at least 1,200 hours.

This educational pathway may dissuade prospective Black men from entering the field because of a lack of academic, career, and experiential opportunities in school psychology during their undergraduate years. We recommend that undergraduate psychology programs have a school psychology track to educate and engage Black men who want to enter graduate studies in the field. We also recommend providing them with undergraduate research opportunities focused on the intersection of being Black and a man in school psychology to provide them with culturally grounded experiences and examine an under-researched area.

## Conclusion

We argued that efforts to increase Black men in school psychology's educational and career pipeline need to be specific to them. Black men school psychologists differ from Black men special educators because they administer specialized testing and conduct interventions that special educators cannot do but impact the future trajectory of Black boys. Providing Black boys and men with early exposure to the school psychology field is essential to increasing their representation in preparation programs and professions. Black men are needed to expand cultural diversity in the school psychology enterprise, offer culturally grounded perspectives, challenge and transform the institutional barriers impacting Black male students (especially those overrepresented in special education) and school psychologists in the field, especially in urban areas.

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