

Person-centered educational practices in an urban alternative high school: the Black male perspective

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Abstract:

This study used phenomenology/consensual qualitative research to investigate the experiences of six Black male students in an urban alternative high school that focused on person-centered and culturally relevant educational practices. Findings reveal the importance of student and staff relationships, the development of student self-awareness, and culturally sensitive pedagogy. Results add to the support of person-centered educational practices paired with culturally relevant curriculum in the education of impoverished Black male youth. Implications for counselors are discussed.

Keywords: Learner-centered education | person-centered education | black youth | alternative education | culturally-relevant pedagogy | consensual qualitative research

Article:

Introduction

The educational landscape for youth that experience marginalization in educational settings is bleak (Bowers, Spratt, & Taff, 2013; Shin & Kendall, 2013; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). For impoverished Black males in urban communities, the outcomes are even more alarming (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993). The need for effective programming (both secondary and tertiary prevention) is clearly evident, yet funding and execution of such programming is limited (Whaley & McQueen, 2004).

A minimal amount of scholarly work has focused on individual, relational, cultural, and contextual factors necessary for nurturing and promoting academic success in poor urban Black young males who are at risk of school failure (Cook, 2000; EvansWinters, 2005). Further, even

less attention has been given to the perspectives these students have on their educational needs and what current educational practices they perceive as helpful (Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014). This is unfortunate considering the frequent marginalization Black youth experience in K-12 school settings. Black students that act out in school are disproportionately labeled troublemakers and/or potentially dangerous, are referred to the office, expelled to disciplinary alternative education schools, and sent to jail or prison more frequently than their White counterparts (Fabelo et al., 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003). Left without the appropriate services and support within their school communities, Black youth are likely to experience increasing difficulties including school failure and recidivism (Lambie & Randell, 2013).

Youth at-risk

The terms “at-risk” or “youth at-risk” have taken on many definitions in the scholarly literature. The most frequently utilized definition suggests being “at-risk” means youth who require temporary or ongoing intervention in order to succeed academically (Koball, 2011). Often, such students may have difficulty successfully transitioning to adulthood, achieving self-sufficiency, and completing their high school diploma. Students who are labeled “at-risk” often are truant, experience emotional or behavioral problems, lack a connection to school, and have difficulty perceiving a sense of belonging (Slaten, Elison, Hughes, Yough, & Shemwell, 2015). These youth may find themselves disproportionately involved in the juvenile justice system and alternative educational settings. The majority of youth within the juvenile justice system are experiencing mental health difficulties (70%; Shufelt & Cocozza, 2006) and many have a history of trauma (92%; Abram et al., 2004). History of substance abuse, anxiety, and mood or behavior problems are highly prevalent among juvenile offenders, who often experience co-occurring difficulties (e.g. Domalanta, Risser, Roberts, & Risser, 2003). Given such difficulties, the label “at-risk” often signifies youth who would benefit from added attention to address social and emotional concerns in order to thrive in their academic pursuits.

Person-centered educational practices

Although many urban Black youth who are labeled “at-risk” experience isolation and marginalization by the K-12 educational system, person-centered education offers some possible solutions for these youth and the climate of their schools. Person-centered educational principles have not only been endorsed by scholars over the past two decades, but also by the public at large (Public Agenda Foundation, 1994). The Public Agenda Foundation (1994) found that 71% of Americans feel that affective education and interpersonal skills are more important to the future of youth than core academic subjects.

The origin of person-centered education comes from the field of counseling and psychotherapy. The work of Carl Rogers (1969) highlighted the importance of his well-known humanistic principles and applied them to education. This approach emphasizes teacher empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness, nondirectivity, and the encouragement of critical thinking (Cornelius-White, 2007). This person-centered theory of education requires the facilitator (i.e. teacher) to initially trust in learners and provide an accepting and empathic educational culture. Moreover, educators are encouraged to be flexible in their facilitation and teaching methods, focusing on transparent communication and compromise with learners. Once

these principles are in place, the learners are more likely to perceive the learning environment as safe and accepting. Examples of person-centered educational techniques include: solving relevant community problems, using co-constructed evaluation measures, instruction adapted to individual needs, social-emotional learning groups or interpersonal process groups, and community involvement in education.

There has been some outcome research conducted on person-centered educational practices, most notably a meta-analysis by Cornelius-White (2007). He conducted a meta-analysis of 119 person-centered (or learner centered) humanistic education studies with over 355,000 students. Results indicated that person-centered teaching variables have an above average impact on positive student outcomes ($r = .31$). The association between positive student-teacher relations with positive student learning outcomes was even larger ($r = .38$). In addition to these overarching outcomes, Cornelius-White (2007) examined more nuanced person-centered educational indicators as well, finding that person-centered education is associated with large increases in student participation ($r = .55$), satisfaction ($r = .44$), motivation to learn ($r = .32$), social connection and skills ($r = .32$), and students critical and creative thinking ($r = .45$). Moreover, there was a reduction in student dropout ($r = .35$), disruptive behavior ($r = .25$), and truancy ($r = .25$).

Black youth and learner-centered practices

Although there is little research on urban Black youth and person-centered educational practices, some studies implicitly suggest the importance of person-centered work. For example, Williams and Portman (2014) asked a focus group of five academically successful impoverished urban Black youth to reflect on the educational needs of poor urban Black youth for academic success. The results suggest that collaborative relationships with school and community partnerships were essential in mitigating barriers to student success. Another component stressed in the results was the need to develop a safe and nurturing environment in which students feel accepted and advocated for by both educators and school counselors (Williams & Portman, 2014). Although novel in their source, such recommendations align with learner-centered educational practices and the core tenets of person-centered education.

Current study

The current study seeks to examine the Black male youth experience of being a student in a person-centered and culturally relevant urban alternative high school. The school is located in one of the poorest communities in a large Midwestern city. The alternative high school is part of the city public school system, but stands apart from other schools in its district because of its unique focus. The goal of the high school is to transition youth from juvenile detention facilities and/or previously being expelled/suspended/ dropped out back to the traditional high school and classroom. Even though this particular school is meant to be a transition for students, the vast majority of students choose to stay until graduation because of their positive experiences as a learner. Therefore, our research team sought to learn more about these students' experiences and their perspectives about what made this particular school so successful. These students' experiences are clearly unique given that most were ostracized by the traditional public school system and had a difficult time feeling as though they belonged in any educational setting. A qualitative inquiry was selected for a variety of reasons. First, this methodological approach is

the most appropriate when utilized for attempting to capture the meaning and lived experiences of participants (Wertz, 2005). Further, marginalized students' voices are often drowned out by large data sets in quantitative studies that frequently do not provide an opportunity to capture the insights and stories of "at-risk" youth and the depth of their educational concerns. Our hope is that the current study can be a step in that direction.

Method

The qualitative approach in this study was grounded in phenomenological (Wertz, 2005) and consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, 2012) methodologies. Phenomenology was used as an orienting framework as a means to assess participants' subjective experience of the phenomena of being educated at a culturally relevant, person-centered alternative school. This framework aims to reduce lived experiences to the essence of the phenomenon without attempting to explain it (van Manen, 1990). Although we used a phenomenological framework to approach data collection, CQR was adopted as a structuring guide for analysis. Recently, CQR has become a popular qualitative method in the counseling field, as it provides a systematic strategy for assessing general themes across participants (Hill, 2012). Moreover, CQR involves the use of a team of researchers working towards consensus in data analysis. This process includes the use of an external auditor that provides additional cross-analysis and ensures trustworthiness of the results.

Setting

Research was conducted at a small alternative school (Type III) in an urban public school district (175 students in 2013) that predominately serves low-income families (80% of students were eligible for free/reduced-price meals). At the time of the study, the student body was 45% male, with 99% of students identifying as African American. Prior to enrollment, the majority of students had difficulty in traditional educational settings, including adjudication (approximately 30% of the school population, with mostly armed robbery and/or burglary charges), expulsion from other schools, previously dropping out of school, truancy issues, and discomfort socially or academically in a large traditional school setting.

Unlike most alternative schools, mental health professionals are an integral part of the staff and mission of the school, including a school psychologist, two school counselors, and a school social worker. The school's primary objective is to assist students' recovery of high school academic credits through a self-paced, online learning system. Students are able to complete coursework both at school and at home through the online system. Through credit recovery, the school helps students transition back to a traditional education setting. In addition to the online curriculum, the school also provides non-traditional curriculum aimed at enhancing students' social/emotional skills, their cultural identity, and a critical awareness of social and political factors impacting their educational opportunities. In order to accommodate space restrictions and promote student engagement, most students are on campus for a half-day and otherwise work from home. All male students at the school were invited to participate in the study, but due to the fluctuation of students coming in and out of the building throughout the day, six individuals were interviewed for the current study.

Participants

Participants were six African American males, ages 17 (three participants), 18 (two participants), and 19 (one participant). All of the participants had histories of conduct problems in school, with four of the participants reported getting expelled from previous high schools. One participant reported being a convicted felon and another participant reported being a parent. All of the participants were from low-income families (i.e. eligible for free/reduced-price meals). All of the participants identified as being heterosexual.

Research team

The research team was comprised of four members: an Arab female and a White male counseling psychology graduate students, and one White male and White female counseling faculty members. An additional White male counseling faculty member served as an external auditor in data analysis. All team members were familiar with phenomenological and CQR methodologies prior to undergoing data analysis.

In accordance with phenomenological approaches (Giorgi, 1985; Wertz, 2005) and CQR (Hill, 2012), the research team elucidated their biases and assumptions prior to any data collection. These assumptions included a belief that Black youth in alternative education would (a) have a history of conduct problems and have few close relationships with staff at previous high schools, (b) report increased academic belongingness coinciding with close student/staff relationships and a culturally-relevant education, (c) discuss the benefits of nontraditional curriculum focusing on the development of students' racial identity. Further, the research team processed the experience of interviewing students that have a different cultural and racial background than the researchers, discussions were had regarding the impact of the lack of Black male researchers on the research team. Throughout data collection and analysis, the research team attempted to "bracket" these assumptions as well as previous academic findings and theories regarding the education of Black youth (Wertz, 2005). By acknowledging and revisiting these assumptions and biases, the research team hoped to maximize the integrity of the results (i.e. selfreflexivity) and enhance our trustworthiness as researchers.

Procedure

Data collection

An interview protocol was developed based on existing literature of educating Black youth and with an effort towards eliciting participants' narratives about their educational experiences and beliefs (see Appendix). The protocol was comprised of nine open-ended questions designed to specifically assess participants' educational experience at the research site, perceptions of the school's composition and atmosphere, perceptions on how their school addresses the needs of Black youth, perceptions of how to engage students who are typically disengaged from traditional schools, and unique challenges faced by the school site.

Following approval from the researchers' host Institutional Review Board, data was collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. For participants under 18 years of age, the researchers obtained written consent from both the student and legal guardian prior to their participation. Interviews were face-to-face and conducted during the school day, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interviews were conducted by the first author, a faculty in educational studies, and two graduate students, and all interviews were audio-recorded and

transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Any identifying information was removed from the transcripts and each was assigned an identification number.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using CQR (Hill, 2012). CQR breaks up the data analysis into various stages, the first of which is the identification of content domains. Domains are broad themes that span across the data and are used to cluster the initial dataset (Hill, 2012). Team members independently read all the transcripts and generated a list of potential domains. The team then met to compare their lists and discuss discrepancies. Through consensus, a final list of domains was generated. To ensure consistency across team members' coding, each team member then coded the same two transcripts using this new list of domains. The remaining transcripts were divided amongst the research team and coded in alternating dyads, with one team member serving as an internal reviewer to ensure stability. Throughout the analysis process, the research team met periodically to revisit and revise the list of domains and consult with one another regarding ambiguous data. Consistent with CQR analysis, all decisions were made by consensus.

Next, core ideas or brief summaries were created (Hill, 2012). Core ideas are meant to be short abstract statements that "capture the essence" of the content comprising each domain (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997, p. 546). In order to accomplish this, team members read all the data within each domain, for a given case and generated core ideas. To ensure accuracy, all core ideas were reviewed by another team member. Upon completion of core ideas, the data was sent to the auditor for review gauging the trustworthiness of the analysis. The auditor provided feedback regarding the coding scheme and accuracy of each domain and core ideas to the raw data. The team reviewed the feedback and, through consensus, made necessary changes.

After the initial audit, the research team conducted a cross analysis by comparing the domains and core ideas across cases and generating a list of common categories. These categories or sub-themes are domain-specific and serve to elucidate the meaning of each domain. Similar to the process of coding domains and core ideas, the research team created an initial list of categories by reviewing each domain and dyads were used to code categories within a given domain. The research team then conducted a final review of the raw data to determine if any important information had been overlooked and if the domain and category labels appropriately reflected the data. At this stage the auditor conducted a full review of the domains, core ideas, and categories against the raw data in order to triangulate the cross-analysis. The auditor provided feedback regarding the labels of certain categories and the differential placement of certain core ideas into categories. This feedback was again adopted through group consensus.

The final step involved calculating the frequencies of each domain and category using the labels put forth by Hill (2012). For this study, a category mentioned in five or more cases (i.e. approximately 85%) were given a frequency descriptor of "general;" categories mentioned in three to four cases (i.e. at least 50% but less than 85%) were labeled "typical;" and categories mentioned in at least two cases (i.e. at least 20% but less than 50%) were labeled "variant." Table 1 depicts the complete listing of domains, categories, and frequencies.

Table 1. Summary of domains, categories, and frequencies.

Domain	Category	Frequency
Staff & student relationships	Guidance/mentoring	General (6)
	Acceptance/non-judgment	General (5)
	Safe and comfortable environment	Typical (5)
	Nurturance/encouragement	Typical (4)
Self-awareness	Critical consciousness	General (6)
	Vocational identity development	Typical (6)
	Intrinsic resiliency skills	Typical (4)
Pedagogy	Self-paced learning	Typical (5)
	Social emotional programing	Typical (5)
	Academic support	Typical (5)
	Black cultural education	Typical (4)

Note: General = at least 5 respondents; Typical = 3–4 respondents; Variant = 2 respondents; Rare = 1 respondent. N = 6.

Results

Analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in three domains: (a) staff and student relationships, (b) self-awareness, and (c) pedagogy.

Staff & student relationships

Participants emphasized the importance of staff and student relationships that included conversations both in and outside of the classroom as helpful in their academic and personal growth. They described the desire for dynamic relationships with staff marked by guidance and mentoring, a sense of acceptance and encouragement, and set in a safe and comfortable environment.

Guidance/mentoring

All participants identified the importance of guidance and mentorship from the staff to students and between students. In relation to the staff, participants described the importance of teachers' influence on areas outside of academics. One participant mentioned that school was “not just about academics, it's about learning about life.” They described teachers as invested in the overall development of each student as a person. One participant articulated their teacher's thought process, stating:

I have to help him. I'm here to help them. You know, I'm not here for me. I'm not here just to teach them a few math problems and a few English lessons. Like, I'm not here for that. . . I'm here to mold these children. I want these children to succeed. I want to see these kids do great things and. . . I'm not gonna stop. Like these teachers got the mentality to be like, I'm not gonna stop until I see them do great things. Like, it's just, I'm not gonna stop.

Participants also felt that sharing similar problems with their peers gave them a stronger connection to each other. They indicated the connection made between students was one aspect

that made for a comfortable environment in which they “wanna do the right thing. . .and wanna succeed.”

Acceptance/non-judgment

Feeling accepted into the school’s community without judgment and without any attempt to change an individual was a common theme among five participants’ perspectives. Participants described the school as a space where students felt understood by peers and heard by their teachers in an environment in which “judgment stops at the door.” One participant mentioned peers “share a common goal” and another described teachers as “someone you can confide in.” Teachers established relationships with their students that left one participant feeling they care not just about “[students’] education, but they care about the students, themselves.” Despite the adverse life situations some of the students have experienced, one participant stated he “could come in [the school] and feel comfortable. Because I could come in here, feel, and know that it’s other people like me that I can relate to and they not gonna judge me [sic].” One participant described the process of extending emotional and academic acceptance to new and potential students, stating:

We let them know it’s ok to just come here and take care of your business, get what you need to get accomplished. And the teachers, at the same time, work with you to make that happen. I mean, so not only do you got the teachers working with you, tell you like. . .its ok, you got the students here to help you, some in the same predicament that you in, to help encourage you and everything.

Safe and comfortable environment

Five participants described the school environment as one in which students feel safe and comfortable discussing personal life experiences and hardships. Words such as “calm,” “stress free,” and “mellow,” were used to describe the school atmosphere. Participants found their teachers’ willingness to share personal experiences as an important part in feeling comfortable and facilitating the strong connection between students and staff. Classes focused on current issues granted a safe space for students to disclose personal information without stunting their learning process. As one participant described it, school is “like, a breath of fresh air. . .I could finally breath, I could finally be here and actually learning, actually [be] in an environment where I feel comfortable.”

Nurturance/encouragement

Four participants identified the importance of teachers’ constant emotional support, respect for the students’ opinions, and willingness to work individually with students. One participant reported, “the staff actually talk to the students. . .they actually care.” He continued to describe that beyond academic support, the staff are “people [the students] can talk to about things that are going on in [their] life.” Participants found the teachers’ judgment-free advice on life and ability to listen to the students’ opinions to be conducive to the accepting environment present at the school. One participant mentioned his personalized webpage with “positive messages” from faculty regarding academic progress “gives me the motivation I need.” While describing how the

school encourages student success, another participant proclaimed that attending school is “coming to my home away from home.”

Self-awareness

Participants described the school’s impact on their enhanced self-awareness. Five participants identified an overall greater understanding of themselves and the world around them, an increased confidence in their future goals, an internal motivation to overcome adversity and succeed.

Critical consciousness

Critical consciousness is the in-depth understanding of the world including the social, political, and economic oppressive forces and the desire to take action against these oppressive elements (Freire, 1971). All participants identified the importance of gaining a better understanding of themselves and the world around them. With the focus on Black culture and history, the school provided an environment in which participants could be surrounded by aspects of their race. Participants felt the class-based discussions in a school-setting “submerged in culture” as helpful in their understanding of their cultural identity. As one participant described:

I honestly don’t know of two other schools that submerge the students and culture and that’s actually to me is important because some people will take it for granted things that we don’t really pay attention to in everyday life and to come to an environment where, I wouldn’t say mandatory but environment where you spend some time everyday constantly you’re gonna soak, something’s gonna soak in, and. . .why not bring a piece of your culture back into your life.

Teachers who shared their personal racial identity struggles made it easier for students to self-disclose, thus further increasing the students’ understanding of their Black identity. In an attempt to explore the world outside of the classroom, discussions focused on oppression, corrupt educational systems, and excessive violence in the community expanded participants’ awareness on the society in which they live. In addition to being taught about their own race, participants mentioned being able to take the perspective of those different from themselves and empathize with their experience. For instance, one participant stated:

It’s really just to stay aware, I think about, the opposite side of things and how things work other than around you, so, how would your surroundings be, how would things work, how would this person feel, how would you feel if you was in this person’s shoes and things like that.

Vocational identity development

Four participants expressed a heightened sense of career goals and interests based on their school experience. They described feeling motivated to put forth effort, set high standards, pursue goals beyond high school, and move past difficult circumstances in pursuit of their

vocational and financial interests. One participant expressed being at school has helped him see there are alternatives to “being out in the streets.” He stated:

If [people in the streets] would like just apply themselves to something constructive instead of mentally destructive, it’ll be a lot better, the society would be a lot better. . . . Even at a young age you can start studying carpentry or you know, just odd jobs, something like that to make a little pocket change, make a little extra money that you need instead of getting out in the streets and hustling.

Participants expressed valuing their education and appreciating the way in which their school encouraged them to get work done in order to graduate. For instance, one participant stated, “coming to [school name] and entering this type of program. . . just helps you excel and succeed.” They found such an environment to enhance their understanding about the opportunities available to them. As one participant described this process, stating:

It’s [the school] opening our eyes as to what’s going on in the world so we’ll be able to realize what’s important in life and what’s B.S., so we won’t get sucked into just unnecessary troubles. Therefore, we’ll be more focused on what we intend to do in our lives, what we want to do. We’ll be able to drive forward. Be that you know, I mean everyone has a dream. No matter who they are they have a dream and they need to strive for it.

Describing their increased understanding of vocational opportunities available to them, many of the participants expressed their desire to pursue future careers in the entertainment industry, in computer programming, and in construction and design.

Intrinsic resiliency skills

Despite facing severe challenges, four participants identified an increased sense of mental resilience to cope and maintain successful academic and personal pursuits through their experience at the school. These participants described themselves as having a positive mentality about the struggles in their life. For instance, one participant stated:

It’s about their mentality. Like because some people in my situation could be like man I can’t get a job, can’t do this, can’t do that, I’m gonna get in the streets go hustling. Some, you know, despite all this I’m still gonna make it. It’s all about mentality.

Participants held an internal desire to move past previous mistakes in order to “make it right.” They emphasized focusing on school to insure the negativity that surrounds them does not interrupt their progress. One participant described his educational pursuit as a constant strive to “learn as much as I can.” Coming from diverse backgrounds with similar challenges, participants found they could take this mentality in school back home with them. As one participant highlighted, “if we can get a person here to start, start it here, I think it’d be easy for them, that once they get out on the streets, they still have that mindset.”

Pedagogy

Pedagogy refers to the teaching practices and curriculum used in the school tailored to promote the learning goals of the students and developed with the unique needs of the students in mind. This domain outlines the students' perspective on their education at the school. All participants described an education environment in which there was self-paced learning, abundant academic support, and an emphasis on critical consciousness.

Self-paced learning

Five students identified self-paced learning through the use of online computer software as an opportunity to guide their own academic progress in school. Participants described the software as helpful in keeping track of assignments, school news and local weather, providing them with audio and visual clips for lectures, and background music while completing their work. Working on their own computer granted them the opportunity to work at their own pace and complete as much or as little of their assignments as they chose. When describing the pace at a traditional school in comparison to that of his current school, one participant mentioned his discomfort with the traditional schooling model: "you're at their speed, whatever speed they decide to go with cause some teachers have the accelerated speed and you can't keep up. Some teachers have a slow pace to where you feel like you could be doing more." Participants found online learning to be helpful in maintaining their motivation and allowing for limited distractions. For instance, one participant expressed, "I can actually focus on my work and get my work done." With a computer tracking their progress, students were able to identify exactly how much they have left before completing their class. One participant indicated this to be helpful to "stay on task because I know, okay if I do 10% a day, ten days I can complete the class and get my credits."

Social-emotional programming

Five participants identified the importance of non-academic programming that allowed them to learn more about themselves and to regulate their emotional responses in navigating personal relationships. Small class discussions on topics covering salient local news, peer relationships, and emotional intelligence were identified as particularly helpful for participants to express their emotions and gain a deeper understanding about the perceptions people have about them. Comparing his experience in school with a traditional curriculum in which he was "mad all the time," one participant described how the use of poetry in class is an opportunity to "get things off [his] chest" in order to help him engage in school. For one participant, the classes offered helped him "develop as a person, as a human being. It helps me develop a psychological understanding around the world around me and the way that people perceive me and the way that I feel about myself." With a greater understanding of himself and the world around him, another participant indicated that the school's programming helped him to be more open-minded to new experiences.

Academic support

In addition to describing an appreciation for self-paced learning, five participants described the teachers, administrators, and their peers as supportive elements for their academic success. Four participants mentioned the teachers' willingness to accommodate every student in order for students to get work done. As one participant noted, "they help us in any way that they can. . . if we don't understand something, they show us how to do it in the way that we can understand."

Participants described teachers and principals as approachable and willing to listen to the students' opinions, noting that this gave them a voice in how they received their education. Another participant highlighted that unlike their traditional school, "sometimes changes are made based upon what we said and how they feel about what we said."

Black cultural education

All participants identified the importance of the school's focus on Black cultural education. Curriculum focused on Black US history granted them the opportunity to learn "a little bit about [their own] cultural background." With images of Black activists in the halls of the school, one participant referred to these images as "your own personal motivator, 'cause you can look at that poster every day and it gives you the motivation you need." Discussions on local community issues relevant to the local Black community were helpful for students to understand life beyond high school. One participant reported:

You understand, the discrimination that we face, and how we feel about the police, and how we feel about certain situations. And, and we talk about Black people back in the day and, you know how drugs is brought into the cities. And, we talk about gangs and all that.

Students were taught about political and legal issues on a local and national level that directly impact them. Moreover, participants indicated that the knowledge learned through the courses and discussions enhanced their perspectives on being Black in America.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of Black male youth in an alternative high school engaged in person-centered educational practices. The study was conducted with six Black male participants who willingly participated in audio-recorded interviews utilizing a phenomenological approach (Wertz, 2005) and CQR-based analysis (Hill, 2012). The results of the study yielded three overarching areas of themes about the student experience: information about staff and student relationships, self-awareness, and pedagogy. Participants were able to articulate their experience as overwhelmingly positive and provided details in each of these thematic areas that overlapped significantly with the person-centered model of educational practices.

Implications for humanistic theory and practice in schools

Participants from the current study conveyed the importance of having meaningful relationships with staff members at the school. They were specific in describing the intricacies of how they ascribe meaning to these relationships. Their description directly overlaps with theoretical principles developed by Rogers (1969) and continued by the work of Rogers, Lyon, and Tausch (2013) and Cornelius-White (2007), affirming the importance of empathy, warmth, and genuineness. The current study adds value to these findings in that it confirms the findings of Cornelius-White (2007) and the theoretical constructs developed by Rogers (1969) and extends them to suggest that impoverished Black urban males at risk for academic failure identify these

tenets as important educational needs. This suggests that professional school counselors, who are extensively trained in these concepts, have much to offer youth and school personnel.

The young men that participated in the current study also expressed that they enjoyed learning about themselves, becoming more self-aware. This adds to previous work in social and emotional learning (SEL; Zins & Elias, 2007) indicating that self-awareness is an integral part of SEL. Durlak and colleagues (2011) conducted a metaanalysis of SEL interventions suggesting the importance of self-awareness training/ education and the impact on both well-being and academic outcomes. Further, the outcome of self-awareness is a natural by-product of person-centered educational practices and a non-directive approach to educational facilitation.

Finally, students discussed the pedagogical approaches utilized in the school and the importance of these particular approaches in their success. Overarching these approaches (i.e. self-paced learning, social and emotional programming, academic support, Black cultural education) is the promotion of student independence and nurturance in the learning process while also giving students the opportunity to learn more about themselves, their culture and community, and their emotions. These pedagogical ideals are similar to the concepts of person-centered educational tenets, but perhaps the novel addition that this study provides is the emphasis on cultural and critical conscious learning (Freire, 1971), a theme that has recently gained traction in the school counseling literature with a call from scholars to make a stronger emphasis in training and practice on social justice, environmental context, and critical consciousness (Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014; Slaten & Baskin, 2014). Students had the opportunity to explore their cultural and racial identity as well as learning about their local community. This has implications for future educational practice and research to understand further the nuances and outcomes of this approach with urban Black youth, particularly those that have previously felt disengaged and ostracized from school. In addition, professional school counselors have an opportunity to engage youth in critical and cultural learning through classroom guidance and psychoeducational groups.

Limitations

The current study utilized CQR (Hill, 2012), a form of qualitative research, which comes with its own subset of methodological limitations. Perhaps the most notable limitation of all qualitative work is the inability to generalize or project the results to other samples and/or groups of individuals. In addition, our sample size meets the minimum criteria for a phenomenological study (i.e. five; Creswell, 2012) but it's possible that having other Black male student voices would add to the current study. Finally, our research team was comprised of predominately White researchers. Thus, additional exploratory studies should include not only additional Black male participants from other alternative schools but also Black male researchers. Quantitative work is needed to examine student outcomes in schools that provide culturally-relevant learner-centered pedagogy.

Conclusion

There is an exponentially growing concern regarding K-12 school environment and the impact it has on academic and psychosocial outcomes for youth. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) recommended school climate reform as an empirical strategy to improve and promote healthy relationships, school belonging, and dropout prevention in schools. The Institute

of Educational Sciences (IES) echoed this recommendation by adding that school climate is a “sound strategy” for dropout prevention (Dynarski et al., 2008).

Person-centered educational principles (Rogers, 1969) and learner-centered practices (American Psychological Association, 1997) have been born out of counseling and psychological disciplines and advocating for caring, responsive, safe, and accepting school formats. However, few school reform initiatives have implemented these practices in K-12 education, particularly in alternative schools in urban communities. Given the history of these person-centered educational practices, counseling professionals in schools need to be involved in promoting, modeling, and educating other professionals on person-centered practices.

A significant school achievement gap continues to exist, despite concern and awareness, amongst at-risk youth compared to their peers. This gap is considerably larger for students that identify as underrepresented minorities, living in poverty, dealing with mental health issues, or all of the above (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). The current study demonstrates, through the voices of youth, that culturally relevant person-centered practices are desired and embraced by Black male youth in urban communities. Future research could examine educators in alternative settings and youth from other urban alternative schools in focus groups to illuminate these person-centered educational practices further. In order to ensure that young people develop successfully, preventing multiple negative behaviors, we must acknowledge that it is imperative to provide nurturing environments for them particularly in schools where youth spend the majority of their time (Biglan, Flay, Embry, & Sandler, 2012).

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Appendix

Interview protocol

- Could you please describe your role at the school?
- How does this school compare to other schools you have been a part of?
- Why did you choose to be a part of this school?
- Can you describe your experience being part of this high school?
- Alternative schools often have the opportunity to incorporate new and innovative methods in the way in which they educate students. In what way(s), if any, has this school utilized non-traditional methods to educate students?
- Describe your school's population.
- Who is the typical student here (academic history, background, etc.)?
- What assets do they bring with them?
- What challenges do they bring with them?
- In what ways does the school help marginalized youth overcome challenges they face?
- What, if any, are the components of the school that are unique compared to other alternative schools?
- Often times, students can become disengaged academically when they do not feel as though they belong at their school. How has the school addressed school culture and attempted to engage students?
- What are the greatest challenges that you face as a school?
- Why are there not more schools like this one?