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# Reasons for African American student attrition from school psychology programs<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study used a series of three in-depth interviews with seven African American participants, for a total of 21 interviews, to explore their experiences in the specialist and doctoral level school psychology programs they left prior to obtaining a professional entry-level degree. The study's purpose was to investigate what factors contributed to participants' attrition. Findings indicate that misalignment between participants' career aims and the practice of school psychology (as presented in the programs they left) contributed to attrition. Poor relationships with school psychology faculty and program cohort peers also played a role in participants' decisions to leave school psychology programs. Results offer a unique lens into racial issues in school psychology. Recommendations for faculty and others interested in preventing African Americans' attrition from school psychology graduate education are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

By 2050, people of color will comprise the majority of the United States; children of color will represent 62% of the country's childhood population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This demographic shift is already evident in America's public schools where in 2010, 46% of students were identified as racial/ethnic minority

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group members (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2012). School psychology, however, is a majority European American profession wherein people of color's representation has been and remains "persistently low" (Fagan, 2004, p. 427). Most recently, Curtis, Castillo, and Gelley (2012) surveyed members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and found that 90.7% were European American, whereas only 8.3% were of color. Three percent identified as African American, 1.3% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.6% identified as Native American/Alaskan Native, and 3.4% identified as Hispanic/Latino (Curtis et al., 2012). This demographic disparity between school psychologists and the school-age population has been noted as a concern because school psychologists are key providers of psychological services to children of color, and it is projected that there will be little increase in racial/ethnic diversity among school psychologists in the coming years (Curtis, Grier, & Hunley, 2004; Zhou et al., 2004).

Lack of racial/ethnic diversity within the profession has implications that extend to school psychology graduate education. For instance, there is evidence that racial/ethnic diversity within university classrooms positively impacts salient learning outcomes such as intellectual engagement (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002), the degree to which students are able to differentiate and integrate multiple perspectives and dimensions (Antonio et al., 2004), and preparation to work within a diverse workforce and society (Orfield & Lee, 2004). Specifically regarding psychologists' ability to serve diverse populations, Hill-Briggs, Evans, and Norman (2004) noted, "to achieve cultural competence, trainees and professionals need not only textbook knowledge and curricula, but also experiences within a diverse academic environment analogous to the diversity of the society and environment in which they will be expected to practice" (p. 14). Indeed, efforts to recruit and retain school psychology students and faculty from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds have been cited as one way to improve school psychology programs' diversity-related training (Loe & Miranda, 2005), as well as a mechanism to promote cultural competence among school psychologists (Brown, Shriberg, & Wang, 2007). Such efforts at the graduate school level are vital, as the only route to becoming a school psychologist is through successful entry into and completion of a specialist (or equivalent) or doctoral school psychology program.

Increasing access to school psychology graduate education to encourage a more racially/ethnically diverse profession would also be consistent with psychology's commitment to social justice (Vasquez & Jones, 2006). According to Speight and Vera (2009), the aim of social justice is for all groups to participate fully in creating a society where resources are distributed equitably, but equally important is the examination and transformation of the processes that initially contributed to unequal outcomes and marginalization of certain groups. As a psychology subfield, however, school psychology has just begun to consider what social justice means to its professional practice (Nastasi, 2008; Speight & Vera, 2009). Most recently, Shriberg, Wynne, Briggs, Bartucci, and Lombardo (2011) explained that social justice work moves the school psychologist from a passive to an active role. Rogers and O'Bryon (2008) suggested that this shift will require rethinking of school psychologists' social responsibilities along with rechanneling of professional energy, expertise, and action. School psychologists can use their positions to advance social justice by examining and challenging practices, policies, and institutional structures that contribute to educational inequalities (Speight & Vera, 2009). However, when Shriberg et al. (2008) surveyed 44 cultural diversity experts in school psychology to identify key constructs related to social justice and school psychology, these experts indicated that a primary barrier to social justice work in school psychology is a lack of diverse professionals within the profession. This finding reaffirms the importance of recruiting and retaining school psychologists of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Scholars recommend that persistent and focused efforts should be made to increase the number of students of color who seek and successfully complete school psychology graduate training (Graves & Wright, 2009; Lopez & Rogers, 2007; Newell et al., 2010; Truscott & Truscott, 2005). Some initiatives have been taken to recruit (and retain) individuals of color into school psychology (Curtis et al., 2004). For instance, NASP developed and adopted an official position statement regarding recruiting and retaining culturally and linguistically diverse school psychologists (NASP, 2009); NASP sponsors the Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Ambassadors of Recruitment initiative, whereby NASP members commit to giving at least one recruitment presentation per school year (NASP, 2010a); NASP, the American Psychological Association (APA), and numerous state level school psychology organizations have established scholarships to support diverse students in school psychology programs (Rogers, 2005); and APA has language in its program accreditation guidelines that encourage programs to recruit racially/ethnically diverse students and faculty (APA, 2008). However, these efforts have not translated into a notable increase in African American representation in school psychology over the years (Curtis et al., 2012, 2004; Graden & Curtis, 1991).

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